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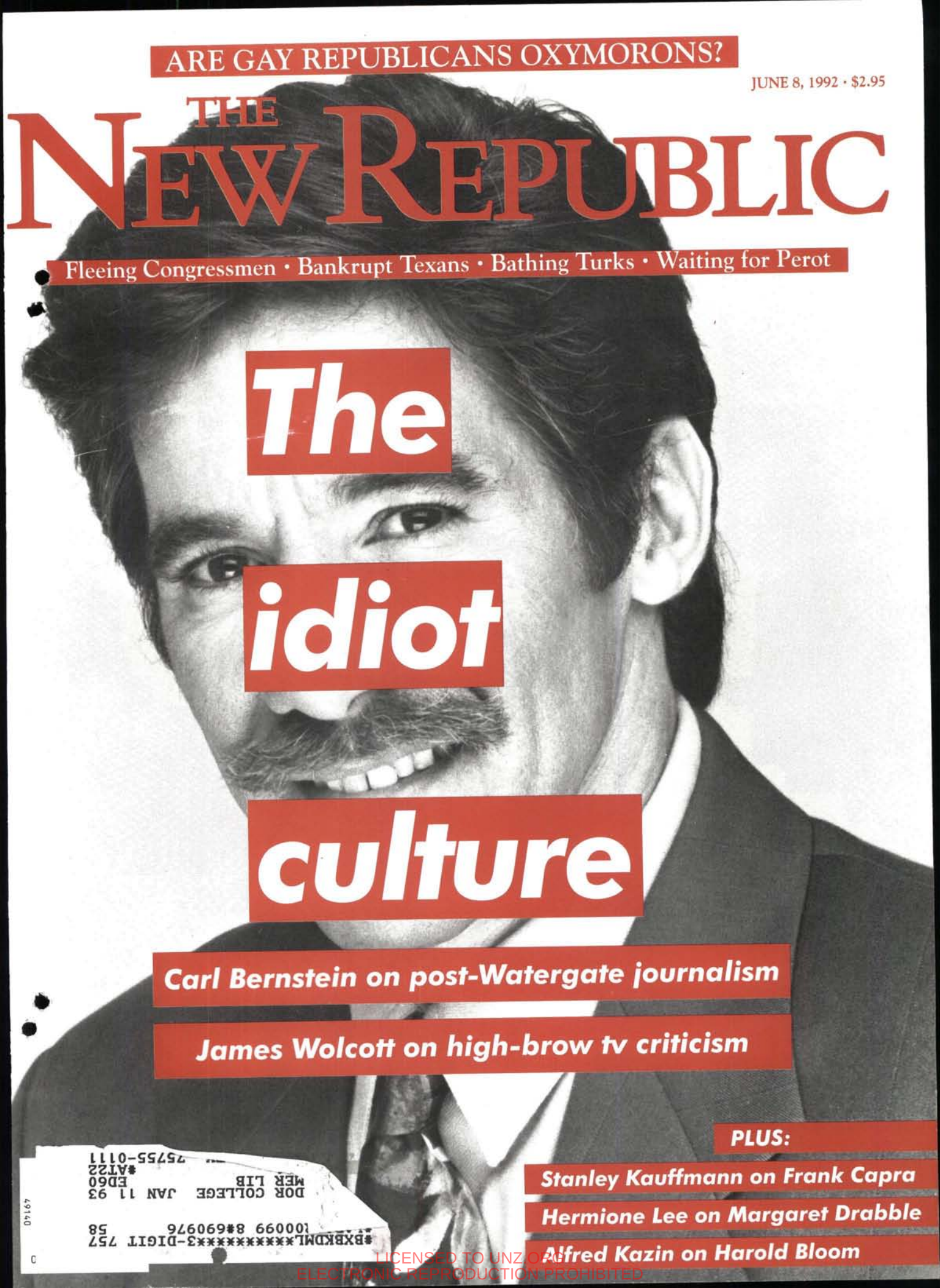

The idiot culture

Carl Bernstein on post-Watergate journalism

James Wolcott on high-brow tv criticism

PLUS:

Stanley Kauffmann on Frank Capra

Hermione Lee on Margaret Drabble

Alfred Kazin on Harold Bloom

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A Weekly Journal of Opinion

JUNE 8, 1992

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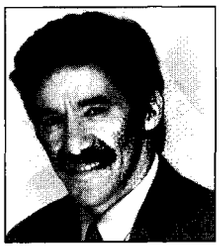

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CORRESPONDENCE

Glurry be to God

To the editors:

Paul Elie is in error when he writes that Bishop Harold Perry of New Orleans was the first black man to become a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States ("Hangin' with the Rome-boys," May 11). That distinction belongs to James Augustine Healy, who became bishop of Portland, Maine, in 1875. When this was pointed out to Bishop Perry in 1964 (when his appointment was announced), Bishop Perry said Bishop Healy did not consider himself a black. Bishop Healy's Irish flock did, however, and sang a ditty, "Glurry be to God, the Bishop's a Nee-gar!" Bishop Healy was born in Georgia, the son of a planter named Michael Healy and a slave woman, Elisa. They had ten children, and at least two of the girls became nuns. A brother of Bishop Healy's, Msgr. Patrick Francis Healy, was president of Georgetown University from 1873 to 1882 and was referred to as the "second founder of Georgetown." Bishop Healy was ordained to the priesthood in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

JAMES K. ANDERSON
Kansas City, Missouri

Fat chance

To the editors:

In "Flat Chance" (April 20), Alan Reynolds asserts that the income shift in favor of the rich over the past decade and a half has been due "almost entirely" to changes in pre-tax income, "with taxes having almost nothing to do with it." Well, let's see. According to Congressional Budget Office estimates, the share of total after-tax income going to the richest 1 percent of the population grew by 60 percent from 1977 to 1992. But if we made today's tax code as progressive as 1977's, the increase would be 34 percent. In other words, the shift in after-tax income toward the very wealthy would be cut almost in half.

Even that's not the whole story. The rich have enjoyed lower taxes for years. Unless we assume they spent every penny of those tax savings, then tax cuts also have boosted the growth in the rich's pre-tax income (from investments). Add these two factors together and it's clear that more than half of the shift in after-tax income to the very rich is a result of the supply-side tax policies. More than half is most, not "almost nothing."

For Reynolds to conclude that because the tax system isn't very progressive we should make it outright regressive makes about as much sense as the following: First Dutch person: "You know, we've had these dikes up for as long as anybody can remember. But as far as I can tell, our country hasn't gotten the slightest bit bigger." Second Dutch Person: "You're right. Those dikes aren't working. Let's tear them down." Or better still, another Dutch person: "With global warming, the sea level is probably going to rise. When that happens, our dikes won't be high enough to stop the ocean from flooding us. Do you think we should build them higher?" Still another Dutch person: "Nah. If they're not high enough, we should just get rid of them."

A final note: Reynolds's claim that sales taxes aren't regressive because people spend everything they've earned by the time they die would be news to Sam Walton's heirs—not to mention the estate section of the American Bar Association.

ROBERT S. MCINTYRE
Washington, D.C.

The writer is director of Citizens for Tax Justice.

To the editors:

Alan Reynolds gave a false impression of my views in "Flat Chance." Reynolds wrote, "As Jeff Faux and others have shown, changes in income distribution over the past decade or two have been almost entirely confined to before-tax income, with taxes having almost nothing to do with it." Indeed, I have written that since 1977 the bulk of the income shift (roughly 80 percent of it) from the bottom four-fifths to the top one-fifth has occurred in before-tax income. I have used this observation to make the point that changes in the structure of the economy are primarily driving income distribution. However, this does not mean that taxes have "almost nothing to do with it." In my view, tax policy made a significant difference in the enrichment of those at the top—especially in the top 1 percent.

JEFF FAUX
Washington, D.C.

The writer is president of the Economic Policy Institute.

To the editors:

Alan Reynolds argues that the fact the flat tax is not progressive is irrelevant, because the tax system has not proved to be an effective means of redistributing income from the rich to the poor anyway. Although this is true, it falsely assumes that the primary purpose of progressive taxation is redistribution of income. The primary purpose of pro-

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gressive taxation is to tie each individual's share of the tax burden to her "ability to pay." Since the marginal utility of money decreases as one has more of it, upper-income taxpayers can afford to pay a proportionally greater share of their incomes than can the poor.

The idea that the government could raise the same amount with a 13 percent flat tax as it raises under the current system is patently false. As Reynolds himself points out, we already have a flat tax in the form of the Social Security tax. Paid by most of us, it imposes a flat rate of 15 percent with no exemptions. Perhaps Reynolds knows something the rest of us don't, but I'd like him to explain how a flat tax of 13 percent could replace an existing flat tax of 15 percent, as well as replacing the current income tax system, and not result in a huge revenue loss. Even if the Social Security tax were retained, a 13 percent flat tax could not replace the revenue stream generated by the current income tax system. Most of the tax "loopholes" a flat tax is designed to close have already been closed—by the Tax Reform Act of 1986. That act essentially transformed the U.S. income tax system into a flat tax. After all, what is the real difference between a two-tiered rate structure (now three) and a single-tiered structure?

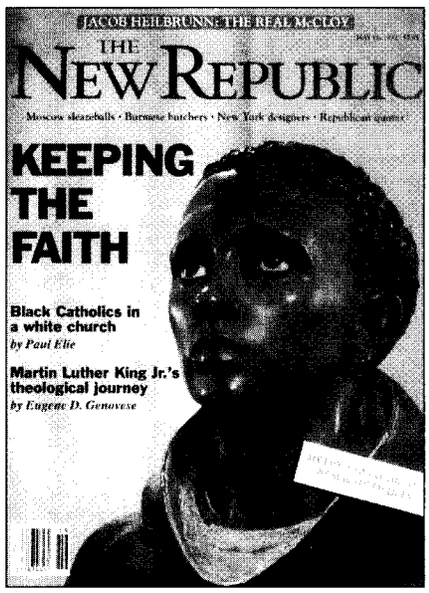
ROBERT C. RICKETTS
Lubbock, Texas

The writer is assistant professor of accounting at Texas Tech University.

Alan Reynolds replies:

To answer Robert Ricketts, the Congressional Budget Office figures it would take a 16 percent flat tax and 16 percent VAT to be revenue neutral. I instead proposed retaining a corporate income tax, which would keep the other two tax rates down. One reason Jerry Brown's tax yields more than the Social Security tax is that the latter falls only on labor income, exempting income from capital. Placing the whole burden on labor is neither a neutral nor particularly progressive idea. The problem with two or three tax rates is that they introduce sharp "notches," which may discourage productive activities that would push added income from, say, a 15 percent to a 28 percent bracket. Tax relief for lower incomes can be more smoothly accommodated with a personal exemption or credit that shrinks as income rises. Such a tax system can easily incorporate a negative income tax to replace current in-kind welfare schemes designed to benefit builders, doctors, and food companies. Even cash transfer payments are now distributed almost at random. The average transfer payment to the poorest two-fifths of households was $7,364 in 1990, while transfers to the richest fifth averaged $5,791. Better targeting on the spending side of the budget is where real help for the poor could lie, but only with a tax system that does not kill the goose.

The CBO has explicitly disowned the estimate that McIntyre cites—that the share of income going to the top 1 percent rose by 60 percent from 1977 to 1989 (not 1992). Instead, the CBO estimates that the share rose by 33 percent, or by 44 percent if anyone can swallow the notion that tax returns are a reasonable way of measuring real capital gains. Had we kept the 1977 tax code in place, though, the stock market would not have risen so impressively, more investors would have held tax-exempt bonds, and the rest would have been reluctant to realize capital gains by selling assets. As a result, income reported to the IRS after


JACOB HEILBRUNN: THE REAL McCOY
THE NEW REPUBLIC
KEEPING THE FAITH
Black Catholics in a white church
by Paul Elie
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by Eugene D. Genovese

1977 would have looked much lower, though that might well be an illusion.

Basic instincts

To the editors:

Writing about *Basic Instinct* ("Linkages," April 13), Stanley Kauffmann shrugs off protests of lesbian and gay activists by commenting, "It's hard to see how people can take the effects of this picture with any seriousness." Kauffmann mentions the protests, only to ignore completely what the protesters were saying: *Basic Instinct* shows a crazed lesbian killer at a time when Hollywood for the most part only *produces* films that show lesbians or gay men as crazed killers. While it can't be "proved" that there's a direct correlation between freaky, murderous gay and lesbian characters in the movies, and the 300 percent rise of violent crimes against lesbians and gays in the last two years, this is something that we have been forced to take with a great deal of "seriousness." Statistically, a lesbian or gay man is much more likely to be a victim of a violent attack or murder than to *be* a murderer or attacker. In fact, lesbians and gay men are much more likely to suffer bias attacks than are members of any other minority group. But to watch Hollywood films, we would never know this.

Kauffmann writes that it's "hard to see" how anyone would object to bigotry in a film that is, after all, "just one more dunk in the slime pit of exploitation." Kauffmann points out that the film is badly made, and that the producers were overpaid for the script. Bad quality and overbudgeting do not excuse, nor should they be offered as an explanation for, homophobia. That is like saying we shouldn't take the KKK "seriously" because after all, everyone knows they are petty, hateful, stupid people.

JENNIE LIVINGSTON
New York, New York

The writer is director of *Paris Is Burning.*

To the editors:

Fred Barnes suggests that Governor Bill Clinton's promise to end the Pentagon's rule against lesbians and gays in the military is "unlikely to help in the fall if he is the nominee" ("Basic Instinct," April 27). If polling data are to be believed, the contrary is true. More than 80 percent of the American public opposes the Pentagon's policy, according to a Penn & Schoen poll conducted a year ago for the Human Rights Campaign Fund. Even in the presumably pro-Pentagon South, only 15 percent of the respondents supported the current policy of discharging competent personnel simply because they are lesbian or gay. Maybe that is why the only candidate for president this year who has gone on record in favor of the current policy is David Duke.

TIM MCFEELEY
Washington, D.C.

The writer is executive director of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a gay rights lobby.

Name of the game

To the editors:

Professor A. L. Motzkin's article on those many years when Jews in the yishuv were called Palestinians ("Ancestors," April 13) is a pointed reminder of how language can be used and changed. Do any readers remember the Lower East Side movie theater, The Palestine, which catered to a virtually total Jewish patronage? Just think if the *Jerusalem Post* had not changed its name from the *Palestine Post.*

HERMAN BROWN
Needham, Massachusetts

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FROM WASHINGTON

Accounts receivable

The notion that the U.S. of A. can be run like a business is fairly fatuous, but at least one of Ross Perot's businesslike notions makes sense. One of the first things a new management looks at when it takes over a business is the accounts receivable. Perot is onto something when he said there's money to be raised through better tax collection.

Perot characteristically puts it in terms of improving the Internal Revenue Service computers, which misses the point and is unfair to the IRS, which has been updating its computers like mad in recent years. And he exaggerates when he claims there is an easy $100 billion a year to be trimmed off the deficit in this way. But the IRS's best estimate of the so-called "tax gap"—the difference between what people owe in taxes and what they pay—is $110 billion to $127 billion in 1992. That's the unpaid federal tax on legal income. It doesn't count drug dealing, etc. And it doesn't count lost state and local taxes, either. There are responsible estimates of the total "tax gap" of $200 billion a year.

This is one of many issues Michael Dukakis flubbed in 1988. He also claimed that a lot of money—variously $100 billion or a mere $35 billion—could be raised through better tax collection. George Bush managed to turn this against him with talk about an "auditor army," thereby simultaneously evoking images of green eyeshades and jackboots. "Governor Dukakis operates from the premise that most Americans must be guilty, and we need more IRS agents to stalk them in their homes," Bush said. "I operate from the premise that most Americans are innocent and shouldn't be hassled."

The truth is that most Americans have no choice but to be innocent. If your income consists of wages and maybe some interest, the IRS knows everything it needs to check up on you. And those new computers are making that checkup easier than ever. By contrast it takes human auditors to check the honesty of better-off people with more complicated affairs, and the chance of being audited has been plummeting for more than a decade. The audit rate for people making more than $50,000 a year has dropped from almost 8 percent to under 2 percent.

There is a populist issue here that Perot may have the wit to seize in a way Dukakis didn't. "Why does George Bush talk tough about all crimes but this one? Tax cheating is a country club crime, like insider trading. I'll take the votes of all the honest people who pay their taxes and George Bush can have the votes of people who cheat."

There are basically three ways to cheat on your taxes: hiding your income, exaggerating your deductions, or not filing a return at all. A remarkable General Accounting Office study published last year titled "IRS Does Not Investigate Most High-Income Nonfilers" reported what it mildly called an "ironic imbalance": if a low-income person doesn't file a return, the IRS computes the tax due and sends a bill. If a high-income person doesn't file a return, that's too complicated, so the IRS sends a notice. If the person ignores the notice the IRS does ... nothing, about half the time.

Individuals pay on average about 85 cents of every dollar they owe in taxes, but the honesty rate varies widely on different forms of income. For wages and salaries it's 99.5 percent. No surprise, since the government not only gets a W-2 form but already has your money through withholding. For interest and dividends, the honesty rate is about 95 percent. For capital gains, it's 88 percent (so capital gainers are already awarding themselves a large chunk of the tax cut George Bush has in mind for them). Among the worst honesty rates is for alimony—71 percent—which is interesting, but neither here nor there.

More cheating is done through exaggerated deductions. But here, as well, the possibilities are limited for most people. Making up a few charitable contributions is about the only option. Far richer are the possibilities for small business owners and self-employed professionals such as doctors and lawyers, which is one reason this group awards itself an unauthorized 23 percent tax cut every year.

The IRS estimates that an expansion of audits and other enforcement programs would bring in four or five dollars for every dollar it cost. And that's

continued on page 50

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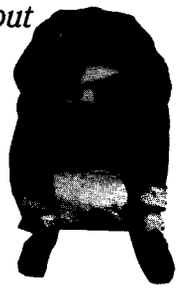

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

JUNE 8, 1992

THE UNCOUNTRY

"There is no way that you can oppress people forever and keep down their aspirations for freedom," George Bush told a group of Cuban exiles in December. Except sometimes. When it comes to the people of Tibet, whose fight for independence continues despite more than forty years of occupation by China, Bush stands stubbornly on the side of the oppressors. By refusing to acknowledge Tibet's status as an occupied country or even to condemn Chinese abuses there, Bush not only perpetuates a grave historical injustice; he ensures the continuation of the brutality that has already claimed more than a million lives and threatens to extinguish Tibetan culture altogether.

Tibet doesn't belong to China, and never has. The Tibetans are distinct in language, religion, ethnicity, culture, and history. Once a vast empire in its own right, Tibet has always maintained political autonomy, even during its periods of subjugation to foreign empires. Indeed, before the Communists "liberated" Tibet in 1949, Beijing had achieved direct control over it only once, following the Manchu invasion of 1910. That occupation lasted only until 1911, when the Tibetans drove out the Chinese and re-established an independence that lasted almost forty years. The government in Tibet at the time was no enlightened democracy; but the current Tibetan government in exile, a body representing more than 100,000 Tibetans in India and elsewhere, offers some hope that a free Tibet would adhere to democratic principles.

Besides, the question here is prior to democracy; it's sovereignty. More than forty years after the invasion, the Chinese still maintain their rule by force of arms. They have redrawn the country's borders, incorporating huge swaths of Tibetan territory into Chinese provinces. They've killed hundreds of thousands of Tibetans, plundered the country's natural resources, populated Tibet's few cities with Chinese immigrants, and subjected Tibetans to gross discrimination in work, housing, education, and health care.

To date no third country has been willing to defy China on the issue. The Bush administration has been particularly craven. In keeping with his general preference for borders over nations, Bush, after being pressured into a brief meeting with the Dalai Lama last year, couldn't even muster a modest statement of sympathy. The president has even gone so far as to interfere with other countries' efforts to address the issue. Recently his ambassador to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights opposed a mildly worded resolution proposed by the EC that would have called on China to "take measures to ensure the full observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms of the Tibetans." The reason? He insisted it would be "morally indefensible to single out the Tibetans when there are millions of Chinese also suffering."

Bush claims that his pro-China stance is designed to encourage reform. But whatever benefits the Chinese may gain from such reform are unlikely to be shared by the Tibetans. The Chinese opposition (and, for that matter, the government of Taiwan) is no less adamant than the hard-liners on the question of China's sovereignty over Tibet. Since the Tibetans have never accepted the legitimacy of Chinese rule, there can be little reason to expect that a liberalized Chinese government would be more willing than the current regime to risk voluntarily granting Tibetans significant autonomy.

The only way to help the Tibetans is to address the issue of Tibet directly. First, the president should speak out against human rights abuses. But he should also recognize the central, incontrovertible issue of sovereignty in this case. The United States needn't risk a full-scale confrontation with China; it should merely support the Dalai Lama's thirty-year campaign to open negotiations between the Tibetan government in exile and the Chinese. And if the Chinese still don't budge, at least the Tibetans will know they haven't been forgotten. A small gesture; and better a gesture at this point than nothing at all. •

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NOTEBOOK

BUSHISM OF THE WEEK: "I hope you know we support the law enforcement thing because if the person in their home here, living in a housing project, doesn't have a feeling of safety and security, why then all is lost, I mean." —May 15, discussing the administration's "Weed and Seed" program for cleaning up inner-city neighborhoods with community leaders in Pittsburgh.

LAWRENCE WELK MEMORIAL BUSHISM: "I'm all for Lawrence Welk. Lawrence Welk is a wonderful man. He used to be, or was, or—wherever he is now, bless him."—February 16

THE CLASSIFIEDS: The Bush administration appears to be increasingly queasy about the disclosure of secret documents detailing its appeasement of Saddam Hussein. Last week Attorney General William Barr sent a letter to House Banking Committee chairman Henry Gonzalez, the chief thorn in the administration's Iraqi flank, saying that Gonzalez's access to classified documents would be cut off unless he solemnly promised to keep items secret in the future. Gonzalez, who has made public dozens of secret papers on the Iraq policy, was unfazed. (See "The Odd Couple" by Mark Hosenball, TNR, June 1.) He said that he would ask the House Judiciary Committee to demand that a special prosecutor be appointed to look into the affair. Meanwhile, Representative Sam Gejdenson, whose House Foreign Affairs subcommittee has been conducting a limp Iraq probe for months, is now asking the White House to declassify a new pile of documents that his staff have examined in camera. Gejdenson so far seems leery of doing the Gonzalez thing and publishing classified material. It might hurt the president's feelings.

I AM GOING TO THE EARTH SUMMIT.
I DO SUPPORT A HEALTHY ENVIROMMENT.
I JUST DON'T WANT TO BE PINNED DOWN TO SPECIFIC LIMITS.
WE'RE LOOKING FOR THE FLEXIBILITY TO AVOID TAKING ANY ACTUAL ACTION.
TOLES
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Global Worming
OILY GEORGE.

OUT IN THE COLD: You'd think the Federal Emergency Management Agency would have better things to do than engage in witch-hunts of its own employees. But Jerald Johnson, a FEMA employee, recently revealed otherwise. As a condition for receiving security clearance to take part in an overseas project for the agency, Mr. Johnson, who had volunteered that he was gay, was required to submit a list of fellow employees who were gay. After initially refusing and being denied clearance, Johnson reluctantly complied. The issue was only brought to light in recent congressional testimony on another matter entirely. We're glad to hear that the list of employees will now be destroyed and that an independent board will review the agency's Office of Security. But it's appalling that the agency's director involved in the incident, Wallace Stickney, has not taken responsibility for the action and quit. Who, after all, does he think he is, presiding over a government agency that hunts down and threatens people for their sexuality? Dick Cheney?

LAST FIFTEEN MINUTES: Readers of TNR will be familiar with the case of Roger Coleman, who was facing imminent execution as we went to press, despite considerable doubt about his guilt in the 1981 murder of Wanda Fay McCoy (see "Dead End" by John Tucker, TNR, May 4). We're saddened by the sentence, of course; but somewhere in the horror is not just dismay at a judicial system that can sanction such an outcome, but amazement that Mr. Coleman spent some of his last forty-eight hours on this earth on the "Donahue" show.

BALLISTIC NEWS: We are pleased to announce the publication of Patrick Glynn's new book, *Closing Pandora's Box: Arms Races, Arms Control, and the History of the Cold War*, out this week from New Republic Books. •

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Washington's Good Health Starts Here

The George Washington University Medical Center is looking for a new Vice President for Medical Affairs and Executive Dean. The previous vice president has just left GW, after 20 years, to accept the presidency of the National Board of Medical Examiners. We stress that applicants who seek this job should have a good beeper. Because you never know who's going to show up—often a senator or a congressman, an ambassador...and sometimes even the President.

And that's just for starters. Besides our high profile clientele, we provide medical care for all segments of the Washington population.

The George Washington University, founded in 1821, is located on an urban 45-acre campus in the historic Foggy Bottom district of the nation's capital, within walking distance of the White House, the U.S. Department of State and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The National Institutes of Health is located in nearby Bethesda, Md.

The George Washington University
WASHINGTON DC
MEDICAL CENTER

The University is a mature educational and research institution comprised of seven schools and offering 85 undergraduate and 70 doctoral programs, including M.D., Ph.D., Ed.D., D.Sc. and the J.D., as well as 170 master's degrees.

A major component of the University is the Medical Center, which includes a 600-student School of Medicine and Health Sciences, recently ranked 10th in the nation by *U.S. News and World Report* among those medical schools emphasizing primary care.

Another element of the Medical Center is the 501-bed hospital, which President Ronald Reagan called "one of the best and most important in the nation" and "a national treasure." President Reagan's life was saved at GW following an assassination attempt in 1981, and GW physicians are routinely consulted by the White House and many government agencies. The Medical Center also includes a 250-member full-time faculty physician practice and a rapidly growing Health Maintenance Organization (HMO), with more than 50,000 members.

A major research institution with more than $35 million currently committed in extramural support, the GW Medical Center conducts additional research activity at The Children's National Medical Center, the medical staff of which comprises GW's pediatric faculty. Investigators at GW enjoy proximity to NIH and other federal research laboratories and programs.

For fiscal year 1991, the University's operating budget was $510 million, of which $270 million represented Medical Center activity. Current University endowment is more than $300 million, ranking 47th in the nation.

The Vice President for Medical Affairs reports directly to President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg and is a member of the senior administrative team of the University. He or she is responsible for all programs and operations of the Medical Center. As Chief Executive Officer of the Medical Center, the Vice President for Medical Affairs exercises academic and administrative responsibility over the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, the University Hospital, the 330 full-time basic science and clinical faculty, the 300 active voluntary physician faculty and The George Washington University Health Plan. The Medical Center is currently implementing a new strategic plan that will result in physical facility reconstruction and major programmatic changes, including new centers of emphasis on Cardiovascular Diseases, Emergency Medicine, Oncology, and Neurosciences. The new Vice President for Medical Affairs will be a significant player in the process that will lead the Medical Center into the 21st Century.

Candidates must have an M.D. or Ph.D. degree and extensive experience related to the administrative management of a university medical center. The position requires understanding and leadership in medical education, basic science and clinical research, hospital administration, health care delivery, fiscal management and strategic planning. A record of leadership and superior managerial and interpersonal skills are vital. The successful candidate must understand the Medical Center's teaching and research mission and yet be able to handle the realities of budgetary constraints and a changing medical practice environment. A sense of humor will help, as will tenacity and vision. Compensation will be competitive and negotiable depending upon qualifications and experience.

Applications and nominations will be reviewed commencing mid-summer 1992 and will continue until the position is filled. Interested candidates should send a resume with a cover letter and the names, addresses and telephone numbers of three references to:

Ms. Cleo Graves
Office of the President
The George Washington University
Rice Hall, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20052

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Thailand's blue cotton revolution.

BIG SU

By Nicholas Dawidoff

Thailand is a place where people generally don't seem quite satisfied unless politics assumes the character of a comic opera. That was certainly the case on February 23, 1991, when Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, the country's first popularly elected premier in a dozen years, was removed from power in a bloodless, military-backed coup. This was the seventeenth such coup attempted in Thailand since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, and a properly seasoned public absorbed the latest installment gracefully. "The whole scenario was pretty boring compared to times past, for this time the tanks didn't roll," wrote *Bangkok Post* columnist Maew Ma. "And having a coup without tanks is like—oh, it's like having mangos without sticky rice." A Bangkok newspaper editor I reached by telephone from New York the night after the coup was positively bubbling. "Oh, we are all enjoying it," he said. "I'm not joking. We laugh at everything."

Not anymore. Last week, at peaceful anti-military demonstrations attended at times by more than 100,000 people, soldiers sprayed crowds with water cannon and bullets, killing, by some reports, hundreds of people in two days. In response, gangs of flag-waving motorcyclists cruised the Bangkok streets, smashing traffic signals and police kiosks, while all over the country people gathered in rallies to express their outrage. "We can't bear it anymore," says a prominent Thai journalist who, like most people I spoke with in Thailand since the shootings began, prefers to remain anonymous. "If we accept this we'd have to wait at least ten years before we have a real democracy. The police are beating the people same as Rodney King. So many lie on the ground."

It had all been a long time coming. Following Chatichai's ouster, the military leaders General Suchinda Kraprayoon and General Sunthorn Kongsompong vowed first to cleanse Thai politics of the corruption of the Chatichai administration and then to hold elections. Skepticism about Suchinda's and Sunthorn's real motivations for the coup abated when they appointed the dignified Anand Panyarachun prime minister, and Thais for the most part returned to the business of stoking one of the world's fastest-growing economies. But competent as he was, Anand remained less than ecstatic about his new job. He ascribed his decision to "a temporary lapse of mental awareness," and made it clear that he wanted out as quickly as possible.

The long-awaited general election was held this year in late March, and the victorious Samakki Tham party selected Narong Wongwan as the new prime minister. But the U.S. State Department quickly revealed that Narong had been refused a United States visa because of alleged involvement in Thai drug-smuggling operations. The United States refused to substantiate the claim or to comment on the reasons for disclosing this fateful information at that particular moment. Narong's position was dramatically weakened; there was concern that crucial Thai-U.S. trade links might be compromised; and Suchinda stepped in. On April 7 "Big Su" was appointed prime minister. "For the sake of the country, it might be necessary to break one's promise and swallow one's pride," he explained on national television, tears cascading down his cheeks.

The nation was less than impressed. Immediately after Suchinda's appointment, 1,000 Thammasat University students staged a protest rally on their Bangkok campus. Afterward about 100 of them arrived at Suchinda's house to demand his resignation. Instead, during the next few weeks Big Su set about constructing his Cabinet. Several of his choices were the same former Chatichai ministers who had been investigated for graft and declared, with typical Thai delicacy, "unusually rich." Such appointments smacked of contempt.

At this point Chamlong Srimuang stepped forward. The former governor of Bangkok and the leader of the Parang Dharma party, Chamlong is a singular Thai politician. A strict Buddhist, he is also an ascetic who consumes a single vegetarian meal each day, sleeps on the floor, remains celibate although he is married, and wears the indigo Thai peasant's garb to work instead of a suit and necktie because, as he says, "I worry that everything beautiful in Thailand is disappearing so that's why I wear this blue cotton costume every day." Chamlong was trained in military schools and rose to the rank of major general before leaving the army for public service in part because he was disturbed by Thailand's social problems in its frantic economic boom. "I think when we compare Thailand to the past the situation now is not good," he said two years ago during a period of double-digit economic growth. "I seek to set an example, not simply to govern."

On May 4 that leadership took the form of martyrdom as Chamlong, already heading the large anti-Suchinda protests that were being held daily near Government House, began a hunger strike he said he would continue until death unless Suchinda resigned. On May 11, with the festival of the Buddhist Lent impending and with pledges from the government that a new constitution would be drafted guaranteeing the democratic process in future, Chamlong ended his vigil, called for the demonstrations to be dispersed with the caveat that if Suchinda were still in power on May 17, they'd be back.

He was and they were. Massive crowds sat in the streets beating plastic water bottles against the pavement while chanting, "*Hia Su La Ook!*" ("Suchinda the giant lizard resign!"), waving banners, and even burning bowls of salt and hot chili peppers, an animist ritual intended to deliver evil spirits to the prime minister. All along, Cham-

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long stressed nonviolence. "*Jai Yen, Jai Yen*" ("Cool Heart, Cool Heart") was whispered through the ranks. Confronting them were skeins of barbed wire and heavily armed soldiers. The two sides faced one another until evening when the first civilians were shot in an attempt to disperse the crowds. The next day Chamlong was arrested along with six other prominent leaders of protest, including Prateep Uengsongtham Hata, four months pregnant.

After Chamlong's arrest, emotions in the crowd smoldered. It was a hot day in the hottest season of the year, and in the absence of a leader the protesters abandoned the peaceful methods that had served them over the past days. Windows were smashed, fires were set, and in the face of a crowd swelling to more than 100,000 people the soldiers first fired into the air and then into the crowds. After two days of violence, the official death tally was at forty, but rumors circulating around Thai newspaper offices suggest that up to 1,000 had perished. Tales swept the city of corpses being spirited away and secretly cremated in temples. By the evening of May 19, Bangkok, so famous for its night life, was deathly quiet.

A sudden solution to the situation seems improbable. As word filters through the country of the massacres, Suchinda is determined to stay his course. What's most impressive about this revolt is that it is grounded in ethical terms. The crowds have largely been composed of middle-class Thais, businessmen bearing their portable telephones, students, flight attendants, and professors. Thailand contains wretched rural poverty that exists in distinct contrast to the industrial prosperity of Bangkok, but this was an ethical revolt staged by the very Thais who have benefited from the economic boom and who have the most to lose. "I was impressed people had such guts to be there not for any personal interest, but only because of their principles," says Saowarop Panyacheewin, a reporter for the *Bangkok Post* who attended the demonstrations. "The issue's not corruption here; it's principles."

NICHOLAS DAWIDOFF, a 1990 Henry Luce fellow in Thailand, is a writer living in New York.

ON THE HILL

EXODUS

By Fred Barnes

Representative Vin Weber's wife, Cheryl, doesn't like the phrase, but Weber has repeated it so often that it's become the sound bite that explains why so many rising young stars of Congress are quitting. "The prize," he says, "is not worth the price." Cheryl Weber thinks it sounds as though her husband, a conservative Republican from rural Minnesota first elected in 1980, is disparaging his job. She's right.

All the lofty reasons given for retiring from Congress are true, but peripheral. Yes, we have divided government, mindless partisanship, a juggernaut of special interests, an unforgiving press corps, etc. But the real reason for the mass exodus is simpler. The job ("the prize") stinks, or at least isn't satisfying anymore. Effort and sacrifice ("the price") have always been required: brutal campaigning, weeks away from home and family, long days of wheel-spinning on legislative trivia. But the prestige of working on titanic issues at the center of the political universe as a senator or House member made the price worth paying. Now there's little prestige and not much chance of making headway on important issues. Instead, complains Democratic Representative Matt McHugh of New York, "I find myself frequently put in the position of defending my character simply for being a member of Congress." He's quitting. So is Representative Brian Donnelly, a Democrat from Massachusetts, who told *The Boston Globe*, "This job, from the outside, looks like the greatest job in America. But it's a lot of running from airport to airport.... I just said, 'To heck with it.'"

For McHugh and Donnelly, re-election would be a snap, but the thrill is gone. And the alternative—a job with higher pay, shorter hours, less hassle—is suddenly attractive to ambitious and talented members of Congress like them. "The banshees and monkeys are staying, and the sequoias are falling," says Representative David Obey, a Democrat from Wisconsin.

To understand the wave of departures—at least sixty-two House members and eight senators won't return—I concentrated on voluntary retirees, not prolific check bouncers and victims of redistricting or scandal. They're the folks who had a choice. I included Weber in this group, despite his 120 overdrafts at the House bank. Weber's reaction to the check crisis was to line up a $2 million re-election war chest, secure backing from ideological interest groups, scare off his toughest opponents, and hire a research director to help run a strongly negative campaign against the Democratic nominee. Convinced he'd win, Weber then announced his retirement.

How come? "This check thing for me was like having a mild heart attack," he says. After organizing his campaign, he started thinking. "Once I got to the point I felt I could win, it gave me the freedom to consider whether I wanted to." If he stayed, he might be Republican leader someday. But the ego gratification of the job had vanished, the issues were fading in significance, and the perks didn't amount to much. The prospects of personally affecting policy seemed slim. And the price of re-election had skyrocketed. Weber knew he'd have to spend every weekend and recess in his district, six hours by plane and car from Washington. His wife said she'd quit her job, and bring the kids (two daughters, both under 2). But Weber decided he didn't want to live out of a suitcase. He figured his family, his finances, his health, and his lifestyle would suffer grievously.

Weber's case is typical in two particular ways. At 39,

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he has options, which made quitting easier. And his beef is more with Congress than with Washington or politics. Before running for Congress, he managed campaigns, including Rudy Boschwitz's Senate victory in 1978. Now he and Ed Rollins, manager of Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign, may team up in a consulting firm in Washington. He should at least triple his House salary ($129,500) and secure a more comfortable, family-oriented lifestyle. He'll stay in Washington.

The others who chose to retire aren't ruling out Washington either. That's where they are a valuable asset as consultants, lobbyists, spokesmen, or policy entrepreneurs. Representative Dennis Eckart, a Democrat from Ohio, is boning up on Ohio law, but he says he hasn't decided whether to return to Cleveland. "I'm leaving public office, but I don't intend to leave public life or public issues," he says. Democratic Senator Tim Wirth says his "base" will always be in Colorado, but he wants to stay active on environmental and education issues. That's bound to bring him to Washington. Even Senator Jake Garn, a Republican from Utah who hates the Washington milieu, isn't forsaking the town. He expects to work in the aerospace or financial services field. My hunch is that any employer will be happy to let him live in Utah, so long as he visits Washington periodically.

Eckart illustrates another point: it's hard to compensate for the loss of public respect for Congress. Since his election in 1980, Eckart, 42, has been on a fast track. He's smart, likable, industrious. He's a deputy whip and in line for a subcommittee chairmanship on the Energy and Commerce Committee. He's gone to hearings on Mondays and stayed late on Thursdays. "You do more for the [Democratic] caucus so the caucus realizes you're a serious player," he says. One year he took ninety plane trips. He's missed vacations and his son's soccer games and swim meets. Looking back, Eckart says he was on a "treadmill." Life in Congress "isn't fun anymore."

On Christmas 1990 Eckart put a letter to his wife, Sandy, under the tree. It said he wanted to quit Congress. "Why don't we try this decision out for a year?" his wife said. On Labor Day weekend, she asked how he felt about the matter. "We're out of here," he said. On September 30, more than a year before election day, he announced he wouldn't run again. He hasn't regretted it. "The congressman used to be someone that people brought their kids over to sit on your lap and take a picture," he says. Today, when seatmates on a plane ask his occupation and Eckart says he's in Congress, "they go right back to reading their newspaper." Eckart says: "There's life after Congress.... This is the time for me to go and have another career. I'm not going to invest twenty years to be Speaker."

Garn was ready to leave in 1986, but President Reagan talked him into running again. But he sold his house, moved his family back to Utah, and commuted to Washington. "I've spent more time with my family living in Utah than I did when I lived" in Washington. The Senate, he says, "isn't conducive to the sort of family life I'd like to have. I laugh when we talk about family values. We're the last people to know what good family life is like. We're too busy being senators. Families are appendages to be photographed." Garn says there are "too many prima donnas and phonies in the Senate," all the more because Senate debates are now televised. "There's more and more posturing, more game playing, and more individualism. The unity, the cooperation, the kindness that used to exist in the Senate are gone."

Wirth, 52, shares Garn's dim view of the Senate. "Individual senators are terrific," he says. "Collectively there's a negative synergism. There's no ringing purpose that drives the institution. Where's the soul of the Senate?" Wirth was elected to the House in 1974 and loved it. He moved to the Senate in 1986 and hates it. Wirth and his wife, Wren, mulled over his decision for months, writing reasons to stay and reasons to quit on legal pads. When he announced on April 8 that he wouldn't run, he zinged "the stalemate" in Washington, the lack of presidential leadership, the humiliating chase for campaign funds, the style of modern campaigns, and so on. He also took a shot at the press. The press fired back. "Oh, give us a break, Tim Wirth," wrote Vincent Carroll of *The Rocky Mountain News*. "Spare us the anguish of your campaign withdrawal statement."

Democratic Senator Kent Conrad, 44, decided to quit in a stolen moment one morning. Running in 1986, he vowed to retire after one term if the deficit hadn't been brought under control. It hasn't. But he was gearing up to run anyway, and re-election appeared certain. He calls the pledge "foolish." Still, it nagged him. When he woke on April 2, his wife, Lucy, asked if he'd decided. "I'm thinking," he said. Then he added, "I'm not going to run." Breaking his promise was too high a price for the prize of staying in the Senate. "As I look back," Conrad says, "I wonder why it was so tough to decide. No regrets." •

THE SHRUB FILE

THE RIOT ACT

By Douglas G. McGrath

Wednesday, April 29, 1992

The verdict was announced in the Rodney King trial. I hate to criticize excessive force, but even I was a little stunned.

The Shrub told reporters, "I'm sure that that marvelous verdict there was well thought out by the—after all, keep in mind, the big black one had been exceeding the speed limit in a heck of a major chasing thing and I'm sure that jury out there studied those—made a pru-

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dent—very closely and—it was—they came to a judgment which is now the judgment which we are discussing now. And I also—hold on a minute, Helen, there's still some more of the presidential answer coming—and so the jury of people made a judgment—and let me just—let me just help you out with something about American justice. I'm thinking back to when I was a kid shot down in the war back there, and I had my little raft and the raft was in the water and I was in the raft and we were floating around out there on the water in the raft out there after—prior to being shot down I'd been in a plane—and but yet, don't cry for me South Pacific!—because I had a lot of time in that little raft to think—*raft was little, but thoughts were big*—about my mom and dad, about the separation of church and state, about democracy and how much colder this water was than the pool at Andover, and I was also thinking *about the American justice system* and so I'd just say this may not be the verdict Rodney King wanted, but now it is the one he got."

Thursday, April 30

The Shrub seemed to miss the point on the King verdict. L.A. is on fire—the worst urban trouble in seventy-five years. So he went on TV to get on the right side of public opinion. He told the nation, "Let's not look at only the part of the glass that's on fire. Let's look at only the part of the glass that isn't being looted and burned, the part of the glass that doesn't need to have 'Black owned' sprayed on it just to keep being a glass."

Sunday, May 3

All White House players are hitting the tube to defend the Shrub's urban policy. The Shrub said, "Let's even let Danny help out here." So the Sapling appeared on "Nightline" and said, "L.A. has a major role in California. It is a city. It is in the desert, yet it is also in the ocean. It is one of the best cities from this century. I wasn't born in this country but I have lived in the United States. It's near Los Angeles. So I think President George Bush is doing everything he can and has a lot of faith in my ability to help on this issue. When Jack Kennedy was my age, he was much younger. The presidency is the only job in this country where your job is to be president of the country." This had an immediate effect: a lot of the looted TVs were thrown back into their stores.

Wednesday, May 6—Los Angeles

The Shrub came to tour the ghetto. Per orders from Mr. Skinner, the Shrub tried to relate to people. He told one black woman, "Listen, I hear your unhappiness. Loss of a house in a natural disaster is a rough piece of pie. I'm relating to you—told to and I am. Message: I share. Don't know if you know it or not but—we've got—we've got a—Bar and I've got an ancestral place up in Maine that really took a slapping from a hurricane last summer. You ever see a hurricane? It's like a riot only it's the weather."

A Korean girl told him she was frightened for her life. He chucked her under the chin—I don't think he meant to, but he dislocated her jaw—and he said, "Know all about fear. When I'm up in Air Force One and the—there's a bumpy—it gets bumpy, so the peanuts on my little tray start pounding into each other and rolling around and start heading for the hills and my drink splashes, too, so that I wonder to myself in my head if there's going to be even enough left to take my Halcion I think, 'Hey! Is the Bush snorkel going under?'" The little girl started to cry.

Louis Sullivan was late joining the walk. As soon as he got there, he ran to catch up with us. When the police saw a black man running toward the Shrub, they threw him to the ground and beat him. Chief Gates refused to apologize, saying Secretary Sullivan's behavior had been provocative. "Did you seen the way he covered his face when we were trying to hit him?"

I think the agents did an excellent job in a tense situation. But the new gear—especially the oxygenated helmets—needs work. Agent Diggins is out again. This was his first day back since the Shrub knocked him out with that stray pitch at the opening of the baseball season. The oxygen tank attached to his helmet was plugged in wrong and instead of pumping air in, it sucked it out.

I became aware that he had a problem when he yanked off the helmet and said several things that didn't make any sense. Dr. Lee told me privately that he doesn't know if this is due to the oxygen loss to his brain or just from spending so much time with the Shrub. (Diggins should be observed, but it looks like he may need to be reassigned to Custodial.)

DOUGLAS G. MCGRATH is a playwright and screenwriter.

BAKU POSTCARD

TURKISH BATH

By Simon Sebag-Montefiore

My host in Baku, once the oil boomtown of the East and now the capital of the independent Muslim republic of Azerbaijan, is a short and comical man called Ishshat who carries a book called *One Hundred Great Turks* in his pocket at all times. The book contains 100 of history's famous generals and statesmen. With the exceptions of Churchill and Alexander the Great, all are revealed to be Turks. If in doubt, my diminutive host, who is an amateur pugilist, as well as an amateur historian without the slightest grasp of historical facts, will reach for his book as fast as a Georgian would reach for his gun.

Ishshat is the architect rebuilding many of the disused mosques in the city of Baku on the edge of the Caspian

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Sea, which was once the center of the Zoroastrian fire-worshiping cult. Outside the city a flame burns in a Zoroastrian temple that dates back to before Muhammad. My guidebook tells me there are still Zoroastrians in the area, though after 1,000 years of Muslim fanaticism, Romanov imperialism, and Communist atheism, I find this unlikely. Ishshat is unimpressed: "First they worshiped fire; then the oil that gave the fire; then the money that the oil made; then the Russian Bolsheviks who burned the money." I ask what is next in this progression. "Allah. Now we will worship only Allah who made the fire, the oil, the money, and then freed us from the Russians."

Ishshat tells me that Azerbaijan should be allied with Turkey against Armenia: "We are truly Turks. We speak a Turkic language; we are Musulmen; our only hope is to be true Musulmen, independent of Moscow, closer to Turkey. We will be brothers with Turkey to fight Armenia."

Despite Ishshat's reopening of mosques, Baku is a Western city populated by Oriental people. Its avenues boast the vast ornate mansions of Baku's oil tycoons, including Rothschild and Nobel, from the turn of the century, when half the world's oil was pumped from here. Ishshat is renovating some of these palaces. He takes me to one thoroughly European mansion, as large as the White House. The competition to keep up with the Rothschilds was so feverish that these houses are absurdly oversized, towering over those of the Azeris.

When the Bolsheviks came to power and massacred the nabobs who owned the houses, they had a problem finding uses for them. Thus Baku boasts a multitude of ridiculous Soviet-Azeri institutes of Leninist-Azeri-Russian-culture-literature-and-working-class solidarity. Now once again, these palaces have lost their use.

Thus Ishshat's palace is now rented out for weddings: among intricate murals, gilded staircases, engraved ceilings, Corinthian pillars, and Gothic facades (the tycoons of Baku were keener on the trappings of taste than on taste itself), an Azeri wedding goes on, complete with Turkish clothes, fezes, kebabs, and coffee. We are greeted by a band of musicians, dressed in flowery blouses and baggy pantaloons as if they belonged in the court of Suleiman the Magnificent, playing Turkish music.

Ironically, Baku, this Dallas of the Orient, became the southern heart of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Nobels and oil millionaires imported people from all over southern Russia to work in their factories; they became the most politicized workers in a turbulent country: Stalin, Mikoyan, Kirov, and a score of other now despised heroes earned their Red spurs organizing strikes here. The Nobel Factory, a Dickensian graveyard of chimneys and rust, became such a bastion of Bolshevism that the Soviets preserved it as a museum. Tours are still available for those unaware that Communists are the most hated of all infidels in Baku. At the height of the Russian civil war, the famous martyred twenty-six commissars shot by the Whites were from Baku. But one day's shooting by Soviet troops three years ago ended the Russian influence here and returned Baku to the Orient.

Ishshat was in Lenin Square, in front of the Stalin Gothic Parliament (a sinister construction of such gigantic ugliness that the old tyrant might have designed it himself as a sort of domestic joke), that night when Gorbachev's troops fired into the crowds, killing almost 200 civilians. He shows me graphic photographs of piles of bloody young bodies. "This boy," he says, handing me a ghastly picture, "I carried myself to the hospital, but he was dead." At the former recreational park overlooking the city is a new nationalist shrine where all 200 are buried in a long line of marble graves, each with a portrait. "They buried them here," he explained, "because during the '30s, they buried Stalin's victims here and then the Russians made it into a park and called it Kirov Park. This was an insult to all of us."

The war with Armenia, in which Ishshat believes Russia supports Armenia, is the catalyst of Azeri nationalism. "I have no time for women, wives, or prostitutes. I think only of Allah and the evil of Armenia," Ishshat confesses. When I ask my host about the Turkish genocide of Armenians (in which 2 million were butchered during the First World War), he answers, without irony, "It's a lie. You must read the wrong history books! Armenia is the Israel of the Caucasus!"

Finally, we are in a Turkish bath, luxuriously outfitted by Ishshat. The old bathhouse's walls are now covered by a mosaic of little blue stones. The manager brings Ishshat and me tea in the anteroom to our bath. All conversation concerns the war with Armenia: the hatred for their Christian neighbor rises with each new tale of barbaric atrocity, even though the brutality is on both sides. The curses on Christians and Armenians fly fast as the steam thickens. But Ishshat is determined to convince me that Baku is the Turkic capital of a triumphant culture that has dominated the history of the human race.

I subsequently find myself lying in a huge tub while a naked Ishshat insists on pouring buckets of very hot water onto me. As he does so, he says: "Atatürk—TURK! Enver Pasha—TURK! Genghis Khan—TURK! Napoleon—TURK!..."

"I really don't think Napoleon was a Turk," I protest.

"Yes. Turk. It's history. Maybe you don't know history."

"Well, I don't remember Napoleon being a Turk..."

"Moment! Moment!" and he rushes off to return with his book. Sure enough, Napoleon was indeed a Turk, though neither he nor the French realized it. Admitting defeat, I sink into the hot bath, realizing that fanatical Azeri nationalism is clearly capable of moving mountains: through the steam and the bloodcurdling curses of the naked Azeri worthies who bathe nearby, I pray for the souls of the poor Armenians who will be the prey of Ishshat's new Napoleonic empire.

SIMON SEBAG-MONTEFIORE's novel *King's Parade* will be published by Penguin Books in May.

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Bankruptcy's wheel of misfortune.

GOING FOR BROKE

By Mary Graham

When former Texas Governor John Connally declared bankruptcy in 1987, trustees sold his wedding china, paintings, and Oriental rugs at a four-day auction that drew a capacity crowd, television cameras, and reporters from all over the country. The fact that most of Connally's unsecured creditors still haven't gotten a nickel has received less attention. Sometime this year, if all goes well, that is just what they will get—a nickel for each dollar they loaned him. Meanwhile, Connally lives comfortably with possessions the bankruptcy court allowed him to keep, including 200 acres of his Picosa Ranch in Floresville, Texas, with its large fieldstone house and swimming pool.

Connally didn't do anything illegal. Neither did former baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn when he suddenly sold his New Jersey home for $1 million and bought a house in northern Florida shortly before his law firm declared bankruptcy. Neither did Ohio businessman and former ambassador to Switzerland Marvin Warner, who commemorated his bankruptcy by moving to a 151-acre horse farm in Ocala, Florida, and putting $3 million in life insurance policies, all protected from creditors by Florida law.

They merely took advantage of the fact that the modern machinery of bankruptcy is built around relics of the nineteenth century—state laws that allow a few debtors to keep their million-dollar houses but subject many more people to arbitrary and draconian rules. These rules amount to a double standard that favors people who own a lot of property and can hire expensive lawyers to plan strategy. "The point is not how much bric-a-brac you keep in each state," says Elizabeth Warren, professor of commercial law at the University of Pennsylvania and co-author of the most thorough recent study of personal bankruptcy. "It's a question of integrity. These laws make people think the whole system is unfair."

Connally kept his ranch because Texas allows people who declare bankruptcy to keep *any* house and up to an acre of land in the city, or 200 acres outside city limits. Texas also recently doubled, to $60,000, the amount of personal property an individual can keep. "Texas was settled by debtors," explains Warren. "If you got in enough trouble, you moved there. In old court records, you see a notation next to uncollected debts, MTT—moved to Texas."

At the other extreme, Delaware allows no home and only $500 worth of possessions, including the family Bible, schoolbooks, a burial plot, clothing, tools, a piano, and a sewing machine. In Virginia essentials include a deck of cards, a spinning wheel, 200 pounds of pork or bacon, twenty-four spoons (more if the family has more than twelve members), a cow and a calf, three hogs, and a horse. People who declare bankruptcy in Vermont are allowed, among other items, ten cords of firewood and three swarms of bees.

These provisions are more than simply a poignant reminder of what people needed to survive in simpler times. Byzantine rules encourage game-playing by those who can afford to hire creative lawyers. The more money a debtor has to pay lawyers and the more he owes, the more property he is likely to keep. And creditors have an interest in cooperating with a debtor's dodging and weaving if he owes millions of dollars, rather than thousands. They may not press all their claims because they can't afford to let him fail, and they may not care how he spends the last 2 or 3 million.

But for ordinary debtors, the results can be brutally unfair. As the rules now work, it is an accident of geography whether a debtor or his creditors get the house and the car. (About half the people who declare bankruptcy own homes, and most have cars.) "When I worked in Philadelphia last year, I don't remember a client ever losing a home," says Gary Klein, staff attorney at the National Consumer Law Center. "In New Hampshire, almost everyone loses them." Because property values are higher, people have bigger monthly payments in states like New Hampshire. But the quirkiness of bankruptcy laws in the two states means that a couple in Pennsylvania can keep $15,000 in home equity while New Hampshire allows only $5,000. Big differences among states also show up in the amounts of pensions and life insurance people can keep.

Congress came close to correcting this situation in 1978, when it completely rewrote the bankruptcy laws for the first time in eighty years. Under the new law, many good ideas were adopted. Filing was made easier, people with steady incomes got more time to pay their debts, bankruptcy courts were modernized to cope with rising caseloads, and priorities among people owed money were revised to take account of the complexities of the credit economy. State law relics were supposed to be replaced with a modern list of property needed by debtors to get back on their feet. But in a last-minute compromise, states were permitted to "opt out." After a round of lobbying by the consumer credit industry, eager to preserve old and stingy state laws, thirty-six states decided to keep their own rules.

Silly arguments are used to keep these laws in place. The charge that a national policy would violate historic state rights ignores both the Constitution, which calls for "uniform" bankruptcy laws, and the fact that early laws did set up a national policy, later abandoned. And the claim that state rules reflect regional variations in the cost of living has been made anachronistic by the

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larger variations between urban and rural areas within each state.

The old provisions also have nothing to do with the two principles that are supposed to govern financial failure in America. The first is to avoid a mad scramble among creditors. Traditionally, bankruptcy's purpose was simply to divide a debtor's remaining property among people owed money in an orderly and predictable way. The second is to give debtors a chance to get back on their feet by canceling debts and permitti g them to keep enough property to avoid becoming wards of the state.

Both of these ideas are still important. They also are—and always have been—in direct opposition to each other. The debtor's gain in fresh start is always the creditor's loss in repayment. Historically, the two doctrines have seesawed in and out of favor. Debtors have been in the ascendancy since the 1978 reforms, which were a response to hardships worked by earlier laws. This year creditors are trying to make a comeback by convincing Congress to make bankruptcy more restrictive. But nowhere among the doctrines of bankruptcy is there a tenet that says that the fall of rich debtors should be cushioned with more property than the fall of anyone else, while they are excused from paying back what they owe. Bankruptcy is intended to be a leveler: a last resort, not just another way to avoid finally facing the music.

In other countries these issues don't even arise. "The role of bankruptcy in most countries is simply to provide a forum for the distribution of assets," says Frank Kennedy, a law professor who helped draft the 1978 reforms. "Debtors have to keep paying on old debts." Even in countries where individuals are permitted to cancel debts, legal conditions and the continuing stigma of bankruptcy make it difficult to do so. In England, a society of former bankrupts works to resist prejudice against them. Bankruptcy is technically possible in Japan, but usually the debtor's extended family pays his creditors to avoid the shame of a public filing.

Bankruptcy reform in this country may be more urgent than ever. Numbers tell a story of middle-class families struggling to keep up payments on more and more debt. Contrary to popular notions, Americans continue to show remarkable financial responsibility, even in strained circumstances. Almost all consumers (about 97 percent, at last count) pay their bills on time. But more debt means more people living close to the edge, where a sudden illness or layoff can plunge them into bankruptcy. Personal bankruptcies have tripled since 1984, almost exactly tracking increases in consumer debt as a percentage of income. The total will probably top 1 million this year.

The Senate is pondering changes in the bankruptcy laws. One change not under consideration is replacing the existing labyrinth of state laws with one sensible set of rules. It's forbidden territory, politically, due to the strength of the consumer credit industry lobby and the protective stance of members of Congress from states that give debtors either much more or much less than they would get under federal rules. This is one of those issues where checks and balances don't work. No counterbalancing debtors' lobby is clamoring for change because no one in bankruptcy wants to be there or plans to stay there.

Meanwhile, old and inconsistent laws continue to send destructive ripples through overloaded bankruptcy courts. People are rewarded for evasive moves. "You may want to do what former baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn and banker Marvin Warner did: sell your home and move to a state that offers better protection," recommends a recent self-help book on bankruptcy. Or at least invest in some bankruptcy-exempt hogs.

MARY GRAHAM is a lawyer and writer who lives in Washington, D.C.

Iran's Mullahs chill out.

UNVEILED

By Ethan Bronner

TEHRAN, IRAN

When she begins her song, this handsome, 21-year-old student of drama and music, it seems in keeping with an already gracious evening. She trills and sways softly as the dozen or so guests watch admiringly. But the performance of traditional Persian music, by a woman before a group including men, is another small act of defiance, as illicit as the homemade vodka and wine that are served and the Western dress that is worn behind the closed door of this private home in north Tehran.

When tonight's dinner party draws to a close, the women grudgingly put on long coats and head scarves over stylish skirts and well-groomed hair and get into their cars with their husbands, a few of whom are wearing neckties, almost forbidden symbols of Western decadence until recently. Only a year ago these guests would have feared the harsh censure of the Komiteh, the religious patrol; now it is being phased out. And they drive home through the streets of the capital unafraid of roadblocks to check for alcohol consumption and other assorted sins. Such checkpoints have been sharply reduced.

This appears to be a time of transition for Iran's 13-year-old Islamic revolution. The 1980-88 war with Iraq is long over, and the pretext for tight social strictures and reduced material comfort are gone. Iranians are growing impatient with the tedium of daily life here—the continuing power outages and the fact that young cou-

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ples cannot contemplate marriage because available apartments are rare and prohibitively priced. Petty crime is on the rise; there are recent reports of butcher shop robberies. For a country with nearly $18 billion a year in oil revenue, these are ominous, inexcusable developments.

President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the shrewd pragmatist who emerged as the nation's most important leader after the 1989 death of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, appears to understand all this better than almost anyone else in government. And in recent elections to the Majlis, the Iranian parliament, his backers have won a majority. This will be the first time since the 1979 revolution that hard-liners won't control the parliament. Many of the most radical MPs, including the men who led the takeover of the U.S. Embassy thirteen years ago, were either forbidden from running or lost. "Up until now, Rafsanjani had an excuse for moving slowly on a number of things such as the economy, privatization, foreign policy," commented one Western diplomat. "He had this fierce parliamentary pressure.... [Now] it will no longer be enough just to have a beard and be a good Muslim."

This does not mean the symbols of Iran's international isolation and its puerile anti-Westernism are no longer prominent. The former U.S. Embassy is still an anti-imperialist shrine, known officially as the U.S. Espionage Den. On one of the compound's walls is a large portrait of Khomeini with the quotation in English: "We will make America face a serious defeat." A shop nearby, bearing the catchy name "Center for Publication of U.S. Espionage Den's Documents," sells volumes of reconstituted texts, painstakingly unshredded when the embassy was captured. In the Laleh Hotel, the former Intercontinental, guests are greeted in the lobby by a picture of the Ayatollah and the words, in enormous letters: "Down with USA." But the anti-Americanism seems ritualistic. At the Laleh, payment is in dollars only, and, like everywhere I traveled, as an American I met with kindness and warmth. Consistently people expressed the hope that relations with the United States would be renewed, adding that they had to be on a basis of mutual respect rather than as before.

As one of several dozen Western reporters allowed into Iran last month to report on the parliamentary elections, I found a society reaching out for recognition. The very fact that we were let in and permitted to wander freely was notable. Among the correspondents were Judith Miller of *The New York Times*, who had been told repeatedly over the past decade that she was unwelcome because of an article she had written on Khomeini, and Martin Woollacott of London's *Guardian*, who had been unable to return through the 1980s.

The general level of openness is shocking. Intellectuals need little prodding to tell their problems or their frank impressions of the "Mercedes mullahs," some of whom live off the wealth confiscated from Iranians who fled the revolution. And bank tellers, shopkeepers, even customs agents unhesitantly bemoan the government's inefficiency and corruption. For anyone who has ever been to, say, Syria, a secular paradise of sorts, where liquor flows and most women dress in Western clothes, the comparison is startling. In Damascus, nothing is more feared than a political conversation. The Mukhabarat, or secret police, are presumed to lurk in every corner.

Moreover, though the Iranian press is still filled with fantasies about "the wounding of hundreds of Zionist troops in northern Palestine" (the Iranian version of a roadside explosion in south Lebanon wounding two Israeli soldiers), it is also a lively forum for debate on the financial doings of government officials, the kind of critical discussion that is not seen in the Syrian press.

Even the lot of women here is significantly better than in, say, Saudi Arabia. Iranian women, though dressed in chadors, are not veiled. Women drive and work, even in politics and as ministry functionaries (half a dozen of the top vote-getters for parliamentary seats from Tehran were women). Efforts at self-assertion, through the use of color on shoes, socks, fingernails, and wisps of escaping hair, are increasing. (The latest look is chadors with high-top Nikes.) Makeup, which Komiteh members in the past tested for on the street with cotton and cold cream, is seen in much greater quantities.

Iran is also trying to woo back some of the thousands of its best-educated citizens who fled to the West. Their seized properties are being offered back, and some are allowed to bring in foreign cars. I met several middle-aged Iranians who live in the States who said they are considering a return for the first time. A few are testing the waters for doing business.

Tehran, a city of at least 12 million, is evolving from a nightmarish urban sprawl toward a vaguely livable place. Some greenery is evident, rubbish is collected, and businesses pay their taxes. Revolutionary rhetoric on walls is being replaced with advertisements for cars and soft drinks. This is the work of the ambitious young mayor, Hussein Karbaschi. He is known both for his brutal methods—razing illegal housing and expelling illegal vendors—and for turning every unclaimed lot into a park.

Still, there is no sign of the country's vicious anti-Zionism, or its support for anti-Western and especially anti-Israel guerrilla groups, abating soon. Iran has offered support to the religious extremism of Sudan and to the Islamists in Algeria. The Israelis believe (as do the Americans) that their Argentine Embassy was blown up with at least indirect Iranian help. The government refuses to lift the death sentence on Salman Rushdie. And CIA Director Robert Gates says Iran is spending $2 billion a year to rearm. As one Western diplomat here put it, "They have been trying to buy things around the world that are not compatible with peaceful uses of nuclear power."

In the race for influence in Central Asia, Iran has been hard at work brokering the only vaguely successful cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh and building a railway from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf to serve as the

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conduit for millions of tons of landlocked central Asian goods to the world. This makes the West nervous. But many diplomats and foreigners here feel Iran is being judged unduly harshly because of a Western allergy to Islam. One Western envoy said that Iran feels its work in Nagorno-Karabakh has been seen as imbued with sinister intentions, when in fact its economic and political interests in the feud are natural and legitimate.

In Washington, of course, there is a well-deserved jaundice toward talk of "Iranian moderates." But that does not justify the kind of hysteria toward Islam that seems, at times, to be developing in the West, especially in the United States. For the moment, Iranians see no alternative to an Islamic-based government, although they clearly welcome the more tolerant version currently emerging. And though Rafsanjani is in increasing control, he will face pressure from hard-liners in the coming months and years. It would be more farsighted for the United States to encourage his embryonic changes than to continue to pursue a policy of total ostracism toward Tehran. The Bush administration could begin by offering to lift the sanctions on Iranian exports left over from the Iran-Iraq war or offering to unfreeze some Iranian assets in American banks in exchange for specific concessions. Rescinding Rushdie's death sentence and terminating the nuclear weapons program are the most important. If Iran is willing to deal, such moves could go a long way toward helping pro-Western Iranians nudge their country back in the right direction.

ETHAN BRONNER is the Middle East correspondent for *The Boston Globe.*

Malcolm Wilkey, prosecutor-stooge.

THE BANK DICK

By Stuart Taylor Jr.

Over fifteen years ago a young legislative aide at the CIA got the agency director to recommend him for a clerkship with a distinguished federal judge. He got the job. About eight years ago the judge had enough of judging and went to the former CIA director for help landing an ambassadorship in Latin America. He got Uruguay.

The CIA director is now president of the United States. The legislative aide, William Barr, is now George Bush's attorney general. And the former judge, Malcolm Wilkey, his ambassadorship behind him, is now working for his former law clerk, as "special counsel" conducting the politically sensitive investigation into the House Bank.

When Barr announced Wilkey's appointment on March 20, the media took at face value Barr's suggestion that his purpose was to ensure impartiality and independence from political pressure. They should have been more skeptical. And when the House bowed to Wilkey's reckless rhetoric and his sweeping subpoena for the bank's records, including 505 current and former members' checks, the media figured the subpoena must be OK. It wasn't.

To the contrary, it was an act of gross prosecutorial overreaching, an affront to the constitutional status of the House and the privacy of hundreds of individuals—no less so for the fact that the courts upheld it in light of the House's craven capitulation. Wilkey's subpoena was only the latest episode in the Justice Department's aggressive pursuit of the case, which looks not only like a waste of law enforcement resources, but like opportunistic exploitation of the affair for political gain as well.

Wilkey has hung a cloud of criminality over the House with a succession of wildly injudicious statements—for example, that some House members "may very well be prosecuted," that "a classic check-kiting scheme may have occurred," and that the House Bank was comparable to "a failed S&L or a fraudulently operated BCCI." Yet neither Wilkey nor anyone else has cited evidence that would support prosecution of a single House member for any crime involving the House Bank. His actions have assisted the Bush campaign by prolonging the public paroxysm over a House Bank "scandal" that has been a phony from day one, hyped by talk-show hosts pandering to the thirst for congressional blood. Even if Wilkey ends up with little to show for his investigating, some of the mud will stick to the 380 or so House members now seeking reelection. Wilkey keeps protesting virtuously that he wants to "clear" innocent House members—as though they are all presumed guilty until pronounced innocent. But nobody seriously suggested this was a criminal matter at all until Wilkey and other Justice officials did.

To deflect objections that Wilkey is engaged in a political fishing expedition, his top aide asserted in a May 1 court hearing that every overdraft written by a House member amounted to an "abuse"—which he compared to "money laundering." This would be laughable were it not uttered by a federal prosecutor armed with potentially oppressive power. Among those thus classified by Wilkey's office as "abusers" are House members such as Washington Democrat Jolene Unsoeld, whose one overdraft was in the amount of 38 cents, and Sidney Yates of Illinois, who unwittingly wrote four overdrafts, all on the same day, because the bank failed to credit a deposit in a timely fashion. As for those members who knowingly wrote overdrafts, hardly any "bounced" checks in the usual sense of stiffing the payee. They weren't abusing anything but the bank's willingness to float what were in effect interest-free loans from House colleagues who left large non-interest-bearing balances in the bank. No public money was ever lost or at risk.

A prosecutor on a vendetta, or one determined to jus-

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tify his own overblown rhetoric, might be able to concoct some theory under which those who wrote big overdrafts might have violated one of the vaguer provisions of the criminal code. It's also possible—even probable—that by rummaging through the financial records of hundreds of people Wilkey may stumble across a *real* crime somewhere. "With the law books filled with a great assortment of crimes, a prosecutor stands a fair chance of finding at least a technical violation of some act on the part of almost anyone," Attorney General (later Justice) Robert Jackson said fifty-two years ago. "In such a case, it is not a question of discovering the commission of a crime and then looking for the man who has committed it, it is a question of picking the man and then searching the law books, or putting investigators to work, to pin some offense on him. It is in this realm ... that the greatest danger of abuse of the prosecuting power lies."

The odds of finding something to pin on somebody are especially great when a prosecutor looks for dirt by rummaging through the private financial records of hundreds of people. That's what top officials of the Nixon White House were counting on in 1972 when they conspired to get the Internal Revenue Service to see what it could find on 575 of Democratic nominee George McGovern's staff members and campaign contributors. The IRS refused. Who knows what crimes the Justice Department might find if, for example, it seized upon the misuse of government planes as a pretext to fish through the records of everyone who works at the White House?

Wilkey's conduct as Barr's special counsel is not the only reason for suspecting his investigation has been exploited for partisan political reasons. There are also the peculiar timing and circumstances of the appointment. The first news that federal prosecutors were looking into possible criminality involving the House Bank came from Jay Stephens, the ambitious U.S. Attorney for Washington, on March 16, a few days after reports that White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater had pronounced all former House members serving in the Bush Cabinet "clean" of overdrafts. Bad timing. The next day, to Stephens's apparent surprise, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and two other Cabinet members conceded they had written a bunch of overdrafts as House members. Three days later Barr took the investigation away from Stephens and put Wilkey in charge, citing "the unique circumstances and sensitivities of this matter."

Wilkey has stressed that Barr told him he wanted to announce "as quickly as possible" the innocence of those who had committed no crime, and then "to go on with those who conceivably might have some criminal violation, and look into their affairs in a more intensive investigation." Was this a noble effort to ensure impartiality? Or a slick damage-control operation aimed at speedy, pre-election exculpation of as many Republican big shots as possible, while letting a lot of Democrats and some Republican small-fry twist slowly in the wind? Consider the choices Barr made. One was to bypass the Ethics in Government Act, which invites (though doesn't require) the attorney general to petition a special three-judge judicial panel to appoint an "independent counsel"—to conduct any criminal investigation in which the attorney general might have a "political conflict of interest." Instead of entrusting the choice to the three judges, Barr entrusted it to himself. He also ensured that the "special counsel," unlike a court-appointed "independent counsel," would serve at his pleasure.

In choosing Wilkey, Barr got a man with an impeccable reputation for intelligence, integrity, and decency, but also with other, less conspicuous, traits well known to Barr: Wilkey was a politically active Republican long before President Nixon put him on the bench in 1970, serving as a delegate to the 1960 Republican convention and receiving a succession of political appointments. And as a judge he had a record of supporting executive power against Congress, and (in the 1979 case of *U.S.* v. *Diggs*) of finding criminal conduct by one House member that a wiser colleague, the late Harold Leventhal, saw as mere ethical sloppiness.

In *Nixon* v. *Sirica* in 1973, Wilkey wrote a dissent arguing that President Nixon could not be required to hand over the Watergate tapes. He contended that, in effect, the president was above the law: neither Congress nor the courts had any constitutional power to require any president, ever, to comply with a subpoena for presidential records. Wilkey's lengthy dissent actually stated a broader proposition—one dramatically at odds with his subpoena of congressional records—by finding a "Tripartite Privilege" under which none of the federal government's three branches could be compelled by the others to surrender its internal records. This was not the law, of course, as the Supreme Court later made clear. But if Wilkey really believed this, he might be a bit less imperious in using legal process to demand congressional records. Unless, of course, what he really believed in was executive power, and in protecting the president who appointed him.

Wilkey's many admirers plausibly insist he would not knowingly be a party to a cynical scheme to manipulate a criminal investigation for political gain. Maybe his conduct can be explained by a bulldog determination to rummage to the fullest through everything Barr has asked him to investigate, combined with gross insensitivity toward the coequal status of the legislative branch. Whatever Wilkey's motives, however, so far he has been doing a fair impression of a ventriloquist's dummy for his former clerk. His actions have dovetailed perfectly with the political interests of the man who helped make him ambassador to Uruguay. Will Wilkey continue in this vein with a pre-election report to Barr "clearing" some current and former House members, including the three in the Bush Cabinet, while leaving the rest "still under investigation"? Stranger things have happened in election years.

STUART TAYLOR JR., a senior writer for *American Lawyer Media*, has written extensively on the House Bank matter for *Legal Times*.

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THE IDIOT CULTURE

By Carl Bernstein

It is now nearly a generation since the drama that began with the Watergate break-in and ended with the resignation of Richard Nixon, a full twenty years in which the American press has been engaged in a strange frenzy of self-congratulation and defensiveness about its performance in that affair and afterward. The self-congratulation is not justified; the defensiveness, alas, is. For increasingly the America rendered today in the American media is illusionary and delusionary—disfigured, unreal, disconnected from the true context of our lives. In covering actually existing American life, the media—weekly, daily, hourly—break new ground in getting it wrong. The coverage is distorted by celebrity and the worship of celebrity; by the reduction of news to gossip, which is the lowest form of news; by sensationalism, which is always a turning away from a society's real condition; and by a political and social discourse that we—the press, the media, the politicians, *and* the people—are turning into a sewer.

Let's go back to Watergate. There is a lesson there, particularly about the press. Twenty years ago, on June 17, 1972, Bob Woodward and I began covering the Watergate story for *The Washington Post.* At the time of the break-in, there were about 2,000 full-time reporters working in Washington, D.C., according to a study by the Columbia University School of Journalism. In the first six months afterward, America's news organizations assigned only fourteen of those 2,000 men and women to cover the Watergate story on a full-time basis. And of those fourteen, only six were assigned to the story on what might be called an "investigative" basis, that is, to go beyond recording the obvious daily statements and court proceedings, and try to find out exactly what had happened.

Despite some of the mythology that has come to surround "investigative" journalism, it is important to remember what we did and did not do in Watergate. For what we did was not, in truth, very exotic. Our actual work in uncovering the Watergate story was rooted in the most basic kind of empirical police reporting. We relied more on shoe leather and common sense and respect for the truth than anything else—on the principles that had been drummed into me at the wonderful old *Washington Star.* Woodward and I were a couple of guys on the Metro desk assigned to cover what at bottom was still a burglary, so we applied the only reportorial techniques we knew. We knocked on a lot of doors, we asked a lot of questions, we spent a lot of time listening: the same thing good reporters from Ben Hecht to Mike Berger to Joe Liebling to the young Tom Wolfe had been doing for years. As local reporters, we had no covey of highly placed sources, no sky's-the-limit expense accounts with which to court the powerful at fancy French restaurants. We did our work far from the enchanting world of the rich and the famous and the powerful. We were grunts.

So we worked our way up, interviewing clerks, secretaries, administrative assistants. We met with them outside their offices and at their homes, at night and on weekends. The prosecutors and the FBI interviewed the same people we did, but always in their offices, always in the presence of administration attorneys, never at home, never at night, never away from jobs and intimidation and pressures. Not surprisingly, the FBI and the Justice Department came up with conclusions that were the opposite of our own, choosing not to triangulate key pieces of information, because they had made what the acting FBI director of the day, L. Patrick Gray III, called "a presumption of regularity" about the men around the president of the United States.

Even our colleagues in the press didn't take our reporting seriously, until our ordinary methodology turned up some extraordinary (and incontrovertible) information: a tale of systematic and illegal political espionage and sabotage directed from the White House, secret funds, wiretapping, a team of "plumbers"—burglars—working for the president of the United States. And then of the cover-up, an obstruction of justice that extended to the president himself.

It is important to remember also the Nixon administration's response. It was to make the conduct of the press the issue in Watergate, instead of the conduct of the president and his men. Day after day the Nixon White House issued what we came to call the "non-denial": asked to comment on what we'd reported, Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, House Minority Leader Jerry Ford, or Senate Republican leader Bob Dole would attack us as purveyors of hearsay, character assassination, and innu-

CARL BERNSTEIN is the author most recently of *Loyalties: A Son's Memoir* (Simon and Schuster).

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Learning from General Motors

BY ALBERT SHANKER, PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

"Teachers' Leader Calls for a Return to Tradition." "Educator Urges Return...to Basics." "Older Ways in Education." People who have seen these headlines describing a talk I recently gave have been asking me if—after 10 years of thinking and working—I've given up on school reform. Or have I finally decided that they had education figured out right in the good old days?

I still believe that we need to look at and question all the things we take for granted about the way schools are organized. And we need to create a radically new model for our schools. We can't achieve this by returning to a so-called Golden Age because it wasn't so golden. At that time, a large majority of kids dropped out long before they completed high school.

People who say that U.S. schools are performing better than ever in most respects are correct. Today, our schools are educating more students and more difficult students to levels that once were attained only by a small and favored group. The trouble is, these levels are below what we need to maintain or improve our standard of living. And they do not compare well with the achievement of students in competitor nations. We are still very much a nation at risk.

Creating a new model for our schools is chancy, and it may take a very long time. We are unlikely to develop it by encouraging 100,000 experiments in 100,000 schools, but there's no reason why we have to proceed in that way. When General Motors experimented with a totally new method of production for the Saturn car, they didn't close down the factories producing their regular models. Over the years when they were perfecting Saturn and its production process, they went on working to improve their traditional models. That is the way most organizations make radical changes. They understand that any institution resists change. They also know that radical change does not work quickly, and there's a chance that it won't work at all.

While people at GM were perfecting the new Saturn, they went on working to improve their other cars.

Why shouldn't we do it this way? While we are developing a new model that is different from our current schools—and eventually a lot better—why not put equal emphasis on improving our traditional schools? The best way of doing this would be to look at the schools of our competitor nations. All of them follow what we call the traditional model of schooling, but all are more successful with students at every level. So we are not talking about modest improvements in traditional U.S. schools; we are talking about big improvements and a radical change.

Here are some of the important differences between their traditional schools and ours:

- Schools in these countries are run by professionals, with relatively little interference by lay persons.
- Schools are financed nationally or regionally. As a result, the disparity between wealthy and poor schools that is so destructive and shocking in the U.S. does not exist.
- For the most part, there is a national curriculum. Teacher training, textbooks and assessments are geared to this curriculum. If students move from teacher to teacher or school to school, there is continuity.
- Assessments are curriculum-based and challenging. Teaching to the test is something positive when you have really good tests.
- These countries produce a higher percentage of students at top levels of achievement. Also, teaching is a relatively prestigious—in Japan, very prestigious—profession, so they can guarantee that all classrooms have teachers who have attained high levels of excellence.
- Like us, these countries track their students. However, we begin as early as first grade and they hold off until later. This means that all their kids get a more or less equal start. Ours don't.
- All these countries have clearly visible consequences for student performance. There are strict college-entry standards and clear employment standards. Students work hard, and their teachers and parents push them because success is rewarded in all tracks.
- Schools are relatively safe and free from disruption because the legal system supports school regulations needed to maintain a proper educational atmosphere.

We'll need some radical changes if traditional U.S. schools are to adopt or adapt characteristics of schools in other countries. But the educational reforms of the past 10 years will make some of these changes easier than we might think.

A year or so ago, school districts looking for a curriculum would have had to choose between creating one—with their comparatively limited resources—or picking up one that was not very good. Now, they can find excellent curriculums or curriculum frameworks, like that of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics or like *Civitas* for civics. Some, like California's outstanding curriculums in history and language arts, come with their own assessments. And these examples of promising work are not exhaustive.

The issue of school governance seems a lot harder given our tradition of local school boards. But here again, recent thinking, stimulated by the school reform movement, is helpful. I'll discuss in a future column how we can bring the idea of schools run by professionals in line with local lay control of the schools.

Improving our schools is not an either-or proposition: Either we create a dazzling new model or we stick to the traditional model. We need to do both, and there's no reason why we can't.

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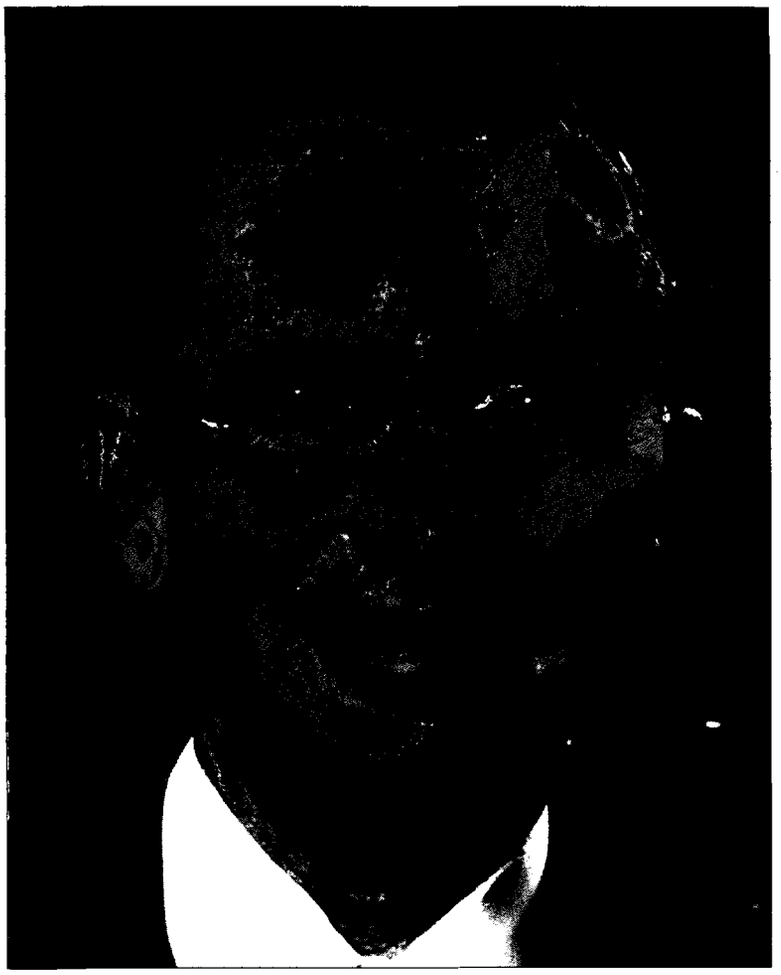
endo without ever addressing the specifics of our stories. "The sources of *The Washington Post* are a fountain of misinformation," the White House responded when we reported that the president's closest aides controlled the secret funds that had paid for the break-in and a pervasive cover-up (not to mention John Mitchell's inspired words to me: "If you print that, Katie Graham's gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer . . . ").

Rather than disappearing after Watergate, the Nixonian technique of making the press the issue reached new heights of cleverness and cynicism during the Reagan administration, and it flourishes today. Hence Reagan's revealing statement about the sad and sorry events that ravaged his presidency in the Iran-contra affair: "What is driving me up the wall is that this wasn't a failure until the press got a tip from that rag in Beirut and began to play it up. This whole thing boils down to a great irresponsibility on the part of the press."



ROSS PEROT, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

And now in George Bush we have still another president obsessed with leaks and secrecy, a president who could not understand why the press considered it news when his men set up a faked drug bust in Lafayette Square across from the White House. "Whose side are you on?" he asked. It was a truly Nixonian question. This contempt for the press, passed on to hundreds of officials who hold public office today—including Bush, may be the most important and lasting legacy of the Nixon administration.

In retrospect, the Nixon administration's extraordinary campaign to undermine the credibility of the press succeeded to a remarkable extent, despite all the post-Watergate posturing in our profession. It succeeded in large part because of our own obvious shortcomings. The hard and simple fact is that our reporting has not been good enough. It was not good enough in the Nixon years, it got worse in the Reagan years, and it is no better now. We are arrogant. We have failed to open up our own institutions in the media to the same kind of scrutiny that we demand of other powerful institutions in the society. We are no more forthcoming or gracious in acknowledging error or misjudgment than the congressional miscreants and bureaucratic felons we spend so much time scrutinizing.

The greatest felony in the news business today (as Woodward recently observed) is to be behind, or to miss, a major story; or more precisely, to seem behind, or to seem in danger of missing, a major story. So speed and quantity substitute for thoroughness and quality, for accuracy and context. The pressure to compete, the fear that somebody else will make the splash first, creates a frenzied environment in which a blizzard of information is presented and serious questions may not be raised; and even in those fortunate instances in which such questions are raised (as happened after some of the egregious stories about the Clinton family), no one has done the weeks and months of work to sort it all out and to answer them properly.

Reporting is not stenography. It is the best obtainable version of the truth. The really significant trends in journalism have not been toward a commitment to the best and the most complex obtainable version of the truth, not toward building a new journalism based on serious, thoughtful reporting. Those are certainly not the priorities that jump out at the reader or the viewer from Page One or "Page Six" of most of our newspapers; and not what a viewer gets when he turns on the 11 o'clock local news or, too often, even network news productions.

"All right, was it really the best sex you ever had?" Those were the words of Diane Sawyer, in an interview of Marla Maples on "Prime Time Live," a broadcast of ABC News (where "more Americans get their news from . . . than any other source"). Those words marked a new low (out of which Sawyer herself has been busily climbing). For more than fifteen years we have been moving away from real journalism toward the creation of a sleazoid info-tainment culture in which the lines between Oprah and Phil and Geraldo and Diane and even Ted, between the *New York Post* and *Newsday*, are too often indistinguishable. In this new culture of journalistic titillation, we

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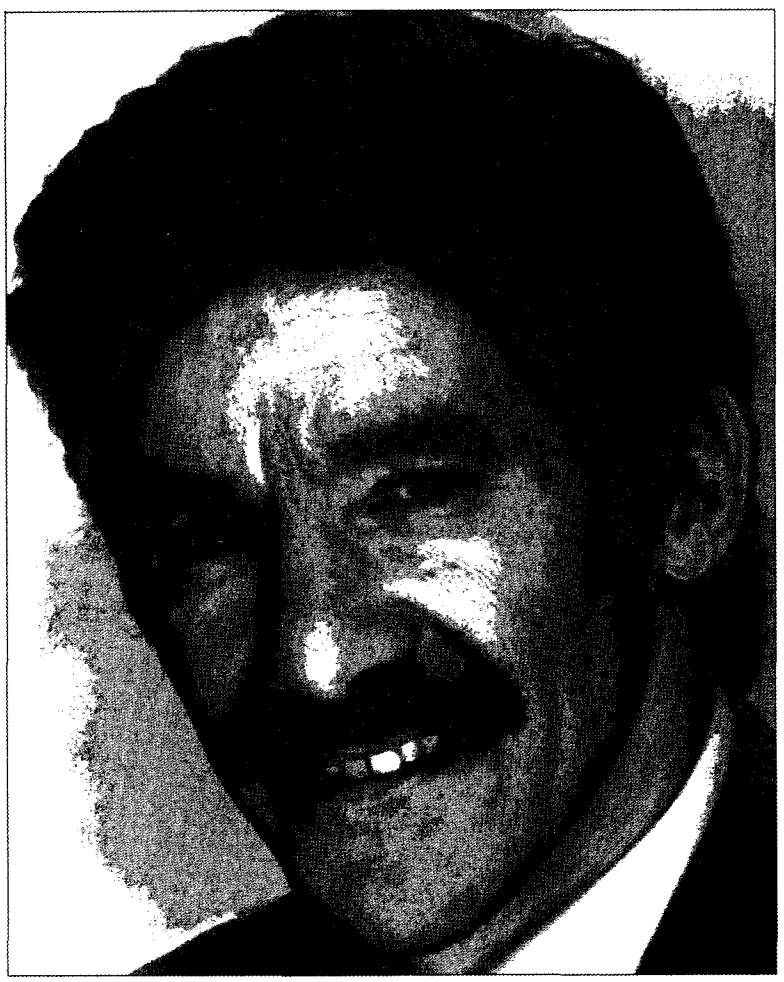
teach our readers and our viewers that the trivial is significant, that the lurid and the loopy are more important than real news. We do not serve our readers and viewers, we pander to them. And we condescend to them, giving them what we think they want and what we calculate will sell and boost ratings and readership. Many of them, sadly, seem to justify our condescension, and to kindle at the trash. Still, it is the role of journalists to challenge people, not merely to amuse them.

We are in the process of creating, in sum, what deserves to be called the idiot culture. Not an idiot *sub*-culture, which every society has bubbling beneath the surface and which can provide harmless fun; but the culture itself. For the first time in our history the weird and the stupid and the coarse are becoming our cultural norm, even our cultural ideal. Last month in New York we witnessed a primary election in which "Donahue," "Imus in the Morning," and the disgraceful coverage of the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Post* eclipsed *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, the network news divisions, and the serious and experienced political reporters on the beat. Even *The New York Times* has been reduced to naming the rape victim in the Willie Smith case; to putting Kitty Kelley on the front page as a news story; to parlaying polls as if they were policies.



GERALDO RIVERA, TELEVISION JOURNALIST

I do not mean to attack popular culture. Good journalism *is* popular culture, but popular culture that stretches and informs its consumers rather than that which appeals to the ever descending lowest common denominator. If, by popular culture, we mean expressions of thought or feeling that require no work of those who consume them, then decent popular journalism is finished. What is happening today, unfortunately, is that the lowest form of popular culture—lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and a contempt for the truth or the reality of most people's lives—has overrun real journalism.

Today ordinary Americans are being stuffed with garbage: by Donahue-Geraldo-Oprah freak shows (cross-dressing in the marketplace; skinheads at your corner luncheonette; pop psychologists rhapsodizing over the airways about the minds of serial killers and sex offenders); by the Maury Povich news; by "Hard Copy"; by Howard Stern; by local newscasts that do special segments devoted to hyping hype. Last month, in supposedly sophisticated New York, the country's biggest media market, there ran a craven five-part series on the 11 o'clock news called "Where Do They Get Those People . . . ?," a special report on where Geraldo and Oprah and Donahue get their freaks (the promo for the series featured Donahue interviewing a diapered man with a pacifier in his mouth).

The point is not only that this is trash journalism. That much is obvious. It is also essential to note that this was on an NBC-owned and -operated station. And who distributes Geraldo? The Tribune Company of Chicago. Who owns the stations on which these cross-dressers and transsexuals and skinheads and lawyers for serial killers get to strut their stuff? The networks, the Washington Post Company, dozens of major newspapers that also own television stations, Times-Mirror and the New York Times Company, among others. And last month Ivana Trump, perhaps the single greatest creation of the idiot culture, a tabloid artifact if ever there was one appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. On th cover, that is, of Condé Nast's flagship magazine, the sam Condé Nast/Newhouse/Random House whose exec tives will yield to nobody in their solemnity about th profession, who will tell you long into the night how s ously in touch with American culture they are, how s ous they are about the truth.

Look, too, at what is on *The New York Times* best-s list these days. *Double Cross: The Explosive Inside Story Mobster Who Controlled America* by Sam and Chuck cana, Warner Books, $22.95. (Don't forget that $2 This book is a fantasy pretty much from cover to co is riddled with inventions and lies, with conspirac never happened, with misinformation and disin

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ne disease that their minds?

Over 4 million people suffer from it, and nearly half of all nursing home patients are its victims.

It's Alzheimer's, the disease that steals a person's mind, dignity and independence, and exacts costs of over $88 billion a year for institutional and home care.

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tion, all designed to line somebody's pockets and satisfy the twisted egos of some fame-hungry relatives of a mobster. But this book has been published by Warner Books, part of Time Warner, a conglomerate I've been associated with for a long time. (*All the President's Men* is a Warner Bros. movie, the paperback of *All the President's Men* was also published by Warner Books, and I've just finished two years as a correspondent and contributor at *Time*.) Surely the publisher of *Time* has no business publishing a book that its executives and its editors know is a historical hoax, with no redeeming value except financial.

By now the defenders of the institutions that I am attacking will have cried the First Amendment. But this is not about the First Amendment, or about free expression. In a free country, we are free for trash, too. But the fact that trash will always find an outlet does not mean that we should always furnish it with an outlet. And the great information conglomerates of this country are now in the trash business. We all know pornography when we see it, and of course it has a right to exist. But we do not all have to be porn publishers; and there is hardly a major media company in America that has not dipped its toe into the social and political equivalent of the porn business in the last fifteen years.

Many, indeed, are now waist-deep in the big muddy. Take Donahue. Eighteen years ago Woodward and I went to Ohio on our book tour because we were told that there was a guy doing a syndicated talk show there who was the most substantive interview in the business. And he was. Donahue had read our book. He had charts, he knew the evidence, he conducted a serious discussion about the implications of Watergate for the country and for the media. Last month, however, Donahue put Bill Clinton on his show—and for half an hour engaged in a mud wrestling contest that was even too much for the studio audience. Donahue was among those interviewed for that WNBC special report about "Where Do They Get Those People ...?," and on that report he uttered a damning extenuation to the effect that as Oprah and the others get farther out there, he too has to do it.

Yes, we have always had a sensational, popular, yellow tabloid press; and we have always had gossip columns, even powerful ones like Hedda Hopper's and Walter Winchell's. But never before have we had anything like today's situation in which supposedly serious people—I mean the so-called intellectual and social elites of this country—live and die by (and actually believe!) these columns and these shows and millions more rely upon them for their primary source of information. Liz Smith, *Newsday*'s gossip columnist and the best of a bad lot, has admitted blithely on more than a few occasions that she doesn't try very hard to check the accuracy of many of her items, or even give the subjects of her column the opportunity to comment on what is being said about them.

For the eight years of the Reagan presidency, the press failed to comprehend that Reagan was a real leader—however asleep at the switch he might have seemed, however shallow his intellect. No leader since FDR so changed the American landscape or saw his vision of the country and the world so thoroughly implanted. But in the Reagan years we in the press rarely went outside Washington to look at the relationship between policy and legislation and judicial appointments to see how the administration's policies were affecting the people—the children and the adults and the institutions of America: in education, in the workplace, in the courts, in the black community, in the family paycheck. In our ridicule of Reagan's rhetoric about the "evil empire," we failed to make the connection between Reagan's policies and the willingness of Gorbachev to loosen the vise of communism. Now the record is slowly becoming known. We have, in fact, missed most of the great stories of our generation, from Iran-contra to the savings and loan debacle.

The failures of the press have contributed immensely to the emergence of a talk-show nation, in which public discourse is reduced to ranting and raving and posturing. We now have a mainstream press whose news agenda is increasingly influenced by this netherworld. On the day that Nelson Mandela returned to Soweto and the allies of World War II agreed to the unification of Germany, the front pages of many "responsible" newspapers were devoted to the divorce of Donald and Ivana Trump.

Now the apotheosis of this talk-show culture is before us. I refer to Ross Perot, a candidate created and sustained by television, launched on "Larry King Live," whose willingness to bluster and to pose is far less in tune with the workings of liberal democracy than with the sumo-pundits of "The McLaughlin Group," a candidate whose only substantive proposal is to replace representative democracy with a live TV talk show for the entire nation. And this candidate, who has dismissively deflected all media scrutiny with shameless assertions of his own ignorance, now leads both parties' candidates in the polls in several major states.

Today the most compelling news story in the world is the condition of America. Our political system is in a deep crisis; we are witnessing a breakdown of the comity and the community that has in the past allowed American democracy to build and to progress. Surely the advent of the talk-show nation is a part of this breakdown. Some good journalism is still being done today, to be sure, but it is the exception and not the rule. Good journalism requires a degree of courage in today's climate, a quality now in scarce supply in our mass media. Many current assumptions in America—about race, about economics, about the fate of our cities—need to be challenged, and we might start with the media. For, next to race, the story of the contemporary American media is the great uncovered story in America today. We need to start asking the same fundamental questions about the press that we do of the other powerful institutions in this society—about who is served, about standards, about self-interest and its eclipse of the public interest and the interest of truth. For the reality is that the media are probably the most powerful of all our institutions today; and they are squandering their power and ignoring their obligation. They—or more precisely, we—have abdicated our responsibility, and the consequence of our abdication is the spectacle, and the triumph, of the idiot culture. •

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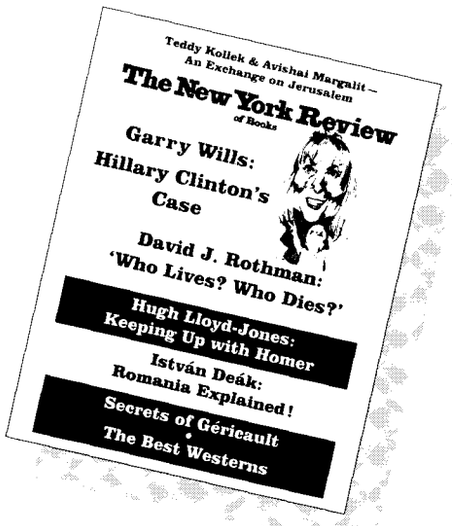
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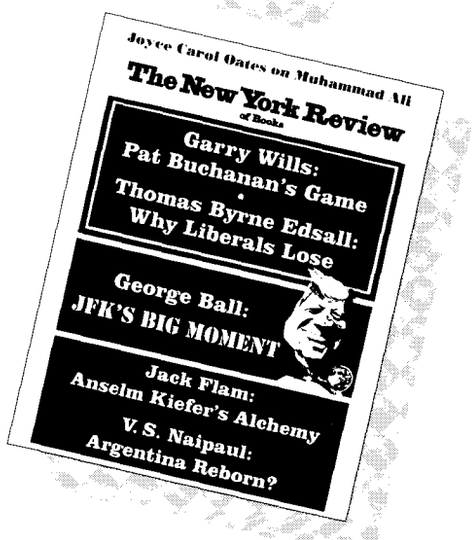
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The march of the pink elephants.

HOMOCONS

By Matthew Rees

When Michael Duffy gathered his friends together at Boston's Claddagh restaurant in January 1990, he told them, "I have an important announcement to make today." They figured he was going to announce that, at 26, he was running for a state representative's seat in his South End neighborhood. "But before I continue there's something about myself I want to make clear. It's something I've told my parents about and they're comfortable with it, and I hope you will be too. The fact is," said Duffy, pausing for effect, "I'm a Republican."

Duffy is one of a growing number of openly gay Republicans: homoconservatives. What was once a simple contradiction is increasingly a complicated political stance, putting both conservatives and liberals in a tough political bind. Where once the oxymoronic lives of gay Republicans were resolved by the closet, they're now provoking querulous debate on both right and left.

The old paradigm of the homoconservative is perhaps best represented by Roy Cohn and Terry Dolan. Cohn, chief counsel to Joseph McCarthy, was both rabidly anti-gay in public and unabashedly homosexual in private. Even when dying of AIDS in 1986, he refused to be open about his sexuality. Similarly, New Right fund-raiser Terry Dolan, a closeted homosexual, led the National Conservative Political Action Committee, which raised direct-mail funds by generating anti-homosexual hysteria.

Then, in the 1970s and '80s, a couple of organizations were set up to cater to uncloseted Republicans. The first, the "Log Cabin Club," was formed in San Francisco in 1977 to oppose a California state initiative that would have prevented gays from teaching in public schools. A more conservative group, Concerned Americans for Individual Rights, was formed in 1984. But when it sponsored a panel debate on gay issues at that year's GOP convention, the panelists were the only ones who showed up. The group folded the next year.

Recently a change has taken place. The National Log Cabin Federation now boasts of 4,500 members from a dozen states and hopes to have a strong presence at the Republican convention in Houston. Duffy, who narrowly lost his race in Boston, is now head of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, and one of several openly gay Republicans serving in government-related positions around the country. In California, Governor Pete Wilson has appointed openly gay Republicans to senior positions in the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Office of Consumer Affairs. Frank Bowman, a founding member of the San Francisco Log Cabin Club, is the liaison to the gay community for San Francisco Mayor Frank Jordan. In Massachusetts, Richard Tafel, president of the NLCF, is an appointee of Republican Governor William Weld in the State's Department of Public Health. Marvin Liebman, who announced his sexuality in the pages of *National Review* two years ago, is the director of special projects at the Federal Trade Commission. Deroy Murdock, a black homocon (yes, they exist too), spent three years in the mid-'80s working for Orrin Hatch on the Judiciary Committee and is now a free-lance writer in New York. The pièce de résistance is Justin Raimondo, chairman of the Libertarian Republican Organizing Committee, who runs the San Francisco Pat Buchanan campaign. No kidding.

It's small-fry compared with the Democrats, of course, who have sixty-one publicly elected gay officials, but it represents a growing response to where the votes are. A 1991 poll of 7,500 gay men and lesbians by the gay-owned, Chicago-based marketing firm Overlooked Opinions showed 11 percent identifying themselves as Republicans, 20 percent as independents, and 64 percent as Democrats. Such polls almost certainly undercount Republicans, many of whom are closeted and leery of polls. Gregory King, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a national gay PAC, argues that "the Democratic nature of the gay vote is exaggerated. I would estimate that nationally gays probably vote about 40 percent Republican."

It's this voting clout that has attracted Republican politicians. The Overlooked Opinions survey revealed 86 percent of gays reported voting in the 1988 presidential election. Weld was widely believed to have won a majority of the state's gay vote thanks to his pro-gay stance, a bloc he claimed was critical to his close win over Democrat John Silber. Of perhaps greater importance than gay voter turnout, however, is gay money. HRCF doled out $518,000 in the 1990 election cycle and is projecting $1 million in contributions in 1992. That would make it one of the twenty-five largest PACs in the country. Republicans don't like to turn that kind of money down.

Gay Republicans—like black Republicans—face opposition from two quarters: their fellow minority members and the Republican establishment. Marti Goodson, a 54-year-old pro-life lesbian from Tampa, Florida, says, "Coming out of the political closet can be more difficult than coming out of the sexual closet because gay conservatives have almost nowhere to go." Duffy's 1990 race typifies the narrow stretch of ground on which homocons tread. The Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus endorsed Duffy's opponent, a straight black Democrat. Local gay congressman Barney Frank also opposed him. The Republican Party, apart from Weld, didn't exactly embrace him. Gay liberals get particularly incensed. Tafel has been called "Phyllis Schlafly with a jockstrap." Since affiliating with the Buchanan campaign, Raimondo has received telephoned death threats from representatives of ACT-UP. "Collaborators," "sellouts," and "self-haters" are among the milder labels

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thrown around. Peter Gomes, a gay, black conservative pastor at Harvard, who presided over Ronald Reagan's inauguration, describes the reaction as presumptive: "There is a kind of liberal arrogance that would make the assumption that because I am both gay and black that I would automatically be a Democrat."

To many gay (and straight) liberals, however, gay Republicans are preposterous. Frank says gay conservatives use the log cabin as their symbol "because their role model is Uncle Tom." (They say it's a reference to Abraham Lincoln.) "Any gay person who has an allegiance to the Republican Party is a co-conspirator in our oppression," says Greg Scott of Queer Nation's D.C. chapter. He believes gay Republicans "should not be welcome in our bars, our meeting places, or our beds. I would prefer it if they simply remained celibate." Gay Republicans are not surprised at this treatment. "Like other minority groups, we're challenging a power structure, and in doing so, we are challenging the legitimacy of those at the top," says Tafel.

The reaction in the GOP can be equally vehement. All the strongest opponents of gay rights are Republicans. William Dannemeyer, Republican representative from Orange County, is renowned for his gay-baiting. He wrote a 228-page book on the subject, in which he argues that "we must either defeat militant homosexuality or it will defeat us." Buchanan has called AIDS "divine retribution" against gays, and Jesse Helms's views on the subject hardly need elaboration. When Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher (who has an openly lesbian daughter) met with representatives of the National Gay Lesbian Task Force in February, the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention fired off a letter to Bush, calling upon him to "disavow any support or sympathy for the homosexual civil rights agenda." In an April 21 meeting with evangelical leaders, Bush said he disagrees with proposals to codify "the homosexual agenda" and opposes giving legal recognition to same-sex marriages.

How do gay Republicans justify their alliance with conservatives who otherwise denigrate them? Mostly they don't. Although none of the gay Republicans I spoke with said he or she had faced much personal homophobia from Republican allies, they concede that it exists. Former Mississippi Republican Representative John Hinson, who works for a gay organization in Virginia, says that "as long as the hard right remains as stridently and as shrilly opposed to gay rights and as long as they retain their control over mechanisms of the party, gays are not going to join." He says that the GOP should embrace gay rights the way the Democrats embraced civil rights at their 1948 convention. Frank Ricchiazzi, executive director of the National Log Cabin PAC, says, "We have a large group of Ayatollah Khomeinis in our party."

Homocons stay in the party partly out of pragmatism, arguing that as long as gays are beholden to the Democrats, they'll never achieve a real breakthrough. They also argue that the Democrats take gays for granted: "There's a real plantation mentality among gays when dealing with the Democratic Party," says Tafel. But the primary reason gay Republicans stay in the GOP is that philosophically they have more in common with Republicans than with Democrats. Although all of them seek the repeal of sodomy laws and the ban on gays in the military, and favor domestic partnership laws, they tend to be skeptical of anti-discrimination laws and hate-crimes legislation. Some say they would have even vetoed the recent gay rights bill in California, as Wilson did, because government should not be in the business of mandating equality. Raimondo believes "people have the right to discriminate. This bill could have forced a lesbian bar to hire a straight doorkeeper." Roy Childs, a gay libertarian who works for Laissez Faire Books in New York, also would have opposed the bill. "I am an ardent supporter of the right to discriminate as long as force is not used," says Childs, who weighs 450 pounds and made a name for himself recently by going on "20/20" and defending the right of a hospital to fire a nurse because of her obesity.

Although many of the Log Cabin Clubs are populated by libertarians, they're not devoid of right-wingers. Leonard Green, a D.C.-based black homocon, supports arresting women who have abortions, labels President Bush "a moderate Democrat in disguise," and says he is "very supportive" of Helms on issues other than race and homosexuality. When asked if he would ever support Frank, he says, "That would be equivalent to a black South African supporting apartheid." Raimondo dismisses Buchanan's comments about gays, saying that "the problem isn't the message, it's the messenger. Pat is saying the same thing the San Francisco AIDS Foundation is saying, but it's considered homophobic when he says AIDS is transmitted through anal sex." Goodson has been active in New Right politics for ten years and opposed the Equal Rights Amendment on the grounds of government intrusion. "I am very pro-family, but I also believe a family can be started by two people of the same sex."

In most cases, the delicate balance gay Republicans try to strike between their sexual orientation and their broader political philosophy doesn't cut it in today's divisive sexual politics. Their fellow homosexual activists seem increasingly radicalized by groups such as Queer Nation; their fellow Republicans are moving to the right in an attempt to deflect the threat from the Buchanan insurgency (the NLCF was rebuffed recently in its attempt to testify before the GOP platform committee). Wilson wrecked his credibility with many gay voters by vetoing the gay rights bill in California, arguing that gays were already adequately protected. Although some gay Republicans agreed with Wilson, the public relations with more liberal gays was terrible. Robert Bauman, a conservative former congressman, says the veto "was perhaps one of the most damning measures ever for the gay Republican movement." Only Weld seems to offer much substantive hope for the future. Yet his vision of a Republican Party that is economically conservative but tolerant of a wide variety of groups and lifestyles is still, for many Republicans, a distant prospect. If it ever materializes, for this generation of gay Republicans it may come just a little too late. •

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BOOKS & The Arts

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Wrongdoings

An oddity. Within a few weeks of each other, a director presents a fiction feature and a feature documentary, both based on the same material. Further oddity: both films are ingrainedly American, yet the director, Michael Apted, is English. Apted reminds us every seven years of his background (*35 Up*), but he works mostly in America (*Coal Miner's Daughter*). These two latest films are about Native Americans and are concerned with FBI men on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

The fictional film, *Thunderheart*, imposes a fairly familiar pattern—cops vs. good guys and bad guys—on vital material. The oppression of the residents, the persistence of tribal mysteries, the tangles of justice—all are swamped by banalities of plot and action. **Incident at Oglala** (Miramax) deals directly—and forcefully and bitterly—with the story that underlies the other picture.

In June 1975 two FBI agents, each in his own car, followed a Native American suspect into the reservation, and very shortly they met gunfire. They got out to return the fire and were killed. The FBI then swooped down in force, naturally, and found four suspects, all Native Americans. One was released for lack of evidence, two were tried and acquitted on the ground that they had fired in self-defense, the fourth man was extradited from Canada, tried, found guilty on two counts of murder in the first degree, and is now serving two consecutive life sentences in Leavenworth. The film's center is this last man, Leonard Peltier.

These facts, in and of themselves, present a certain surface. The point of the film is to burrow beneath that surface. A few matters are uncovered. Armed onslaught, including the murder of women and children, had long been inflicted on people on the reservation, planned by a man named Richard Wilson (now deceased), an Oglala who headed a vigilante group formed to oppose the "traditionalists" of the tribe. These "traditionalists" were active in the American Indian Movement (AIM), and they opposed the Wilson forces, who were regarded by AIM as stooges for U.S. government policies. When the two FBI agents roared in that June day, the residents apparently thought it was the Wilson group attacking again, and they opened fire.

The evidence against the three men who were tried was trumped-up. The film interviews Robert Bolin, the white man who was the foreman of the jury at the first trial—of two of the defendants. Bolin says that the jury couldn't believe the evidence. He adds that when they returned their "Not Guilty" verdict, the FBI agents in the courtroom looked as if they wanted to kill them, the jury.

Peltier was then extradited from Canada—a Canadian official expresses his distaste for the way the procedure was handled—and the evidence against him was forced, under threats of violence, from a mentally unstable Oglala woman. Peltier himself is interviewed in prison and sounds entirely convincing as he details some of the faking of evidence and as he accepts, out of his tribe's religious beliefs, his prison sentence as part of the obligation of a present-day "warrior" fighting for justice.

A Mr. X, hooded, has lately come forward briefly to declare his responsibility for the FBI killings. Peltier says he knows Mr. X's identity but won't reveal it. This confession is completely useless under law, of course, but that isn't really the issue. The real issue is the contention that a case was manufactured against Peltier because the FBI cared more for vengeance than for the guilt of the person who paid. This film was made in the hope of rectifying what is seen as a grave injustice.

Robert Redford, long linked with Native American causes, was the chief mover behind *Incident at Oglala* and speaks much of the narration. Apted has framed and edited well, but there are a few questionable matters. When someone mentions the flight of a man's spirit, Apted inserts a shot of a soaring eagle. He re-creates the initial FBI auto chase, with gunshots crackling on the sound track. It's not misleading, just superfluous. And we never know who is questioning the interviewees. Apted? Redford? Both? Others?

But coming, as it does, soon after the Los Angeles cataclysm, this film is further evidence of our country's ability to ignore miseries—well-known miseries—among our own people. Peltier's imprisonment, it seems, is the oblique result of such an ignoring.

Another oddity, another reminder of the human race's ability to forget. A few weeks ago came the Czech film *The Ear*,

FILMS WORTH SEEING

Casablanca. *Fiftieth birthday reissue—and it looks 50, in an enriched and captivating way. (Reviewed 5/4/92)* **Howards End.** *A blend of the epic and the lyric, as in Forster's novel, exquisitely acted by Vanessa Redgrave, Emma Thompson, Anthony Hopkins, Helena Bonham Carter, and more. (3/23/92)* **November Days.** *Marcel Ophuls's latest documentary explores East and West Germany in the month that the Wall fell. Fascinating. Look for it in the Human Rights Watch film festival. (6/1/92)* **Raspad.** *Fiction woven around the Chernobyl disaster by a Kiev filmmaker. The fiction is slight, the re-creation of the disaster blood-chilling. (5/18/92)* **—SK**

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the first work I had seen by Karel Kachyňa, made in 1970 and suppressed until now. Then, almost immediately, here is the latest Kachyňa, presented as part of the Human Rights Watch film festival described last week.

The Last Butterfly is itself an oddity—directed by a Czech, shot in Paris and Czechoslovakia, and spoken in English. Its story is a moving reminder of past horror, caught in a crystalline fragment. The screenplay was obviously suggested by an event in 1944 at Theresienstadt. A German actor-director named Kurt Gerron (he was the portly head of the troupe in *The Blue Angel*) had been sent there. Inspection by the International Red Cross was forthcoming. The whole place was scrubbed up, flowers were planted, plentiful food was put on the tables. Gerron was ordered to make a documentary about the place, which he did: it was titled *Hitler Presents a Town to the Jews*. When the film was finished and the inspection crisis had passed, the flowers and the food were removed, and Gerron was sent to Auschwitz, where he perished.

In Kachyňa's film, a famous French mime, played by the English actor Tom Courtenay, is living in occupied Paris. Because of an unwitting connection with the French Resistance, Courtenay is forced by the Gestapo to go to the Czech ghetto town and perform for the Red Cross inspection committee. While there, he gets amorously involved with a Jewish woman in charge of the children, and he gets even more emotionally involved with the children themselves. Secretly—secret, too, from the Jewish ghetto police—he prepares a performance with the children that will reveal truth to the inspectors. This is done, but the only visible result is German wrath. At the end, Courtenay chooses to join his fate to the children's.

The screenplay wavers toward sentimentality, but the materials are so overwhelming that concessions are not hard to make. Three elements in the film are sterling. Courtenay's performance, as a somewhat sodden, aging, dejected artist, creates a center for the film. (His miming, however, is not as superb as it is said to be.) The cinematography by Jiři Krejčik moves through a palette of subtle colors that blend or contrast without fuss. As for Kachyňa, the very opening sequence announces his mastery. In the foreground Courtenay, in shirtsleeves, sits at a table and swigs from a bottle while in the background his (Parisian) girlfriend, in soft focus, dresses after lovemaking. The action freezes several times so that the credits can be superimposed. By the time the credits are done, the atmosphere and something of character are clear: *tristesse*, tenderness, middle age beginning to realize some facts before it's too late. It's delicate. •

Robert Brustein on Theater

'Cause Jam Don't Shake Like That

The sweet comfit platter being offered on the stage of the Virginia Theater is called **Jelly's Last Jam**, a succulent musical spread of acting, dancing, and singing that represents a genuine advance in black theatrical expression. George C. Wolfe's previous productions—*The Colored Museum* and *Spunk* (his adaptation of stories by Zora Neale Hurston)—reverberated with an original, if not yet fully formed, artistic voice, while his staging of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (in an adaptation by Thulani Davis) signaled access to cultural references wider than are usually found in African-American plays and productions. Wolfe's new jazz musical about Jelly Roll Morton, *Jelly's Last Jam*, confirms and advances the theatrical promise of this young playwright-director. It is a completely realized manifestation of musical theater, exciting not only for itself but for the roster of talented new performers Wolfe has lined up on the Broadway stage.

Like Spike Lee's *School Daze*, *Jelly's Last Jam* is less concerned with reciting a litany of past and present oppression than with probing prejudices found within the black community itself, usually based on differences of ancestry, income, and education. Wolfe's subject, in short, is not racism but classism—the more widespread, if less publicized, problem of our times, since it is an issue that involves Americans of every ethnic type. Intraracial class prejudice among blacks is sometimes related to shades of skin color (just as some Jews used to discriminate against each other according to accents). But instead of dealing with

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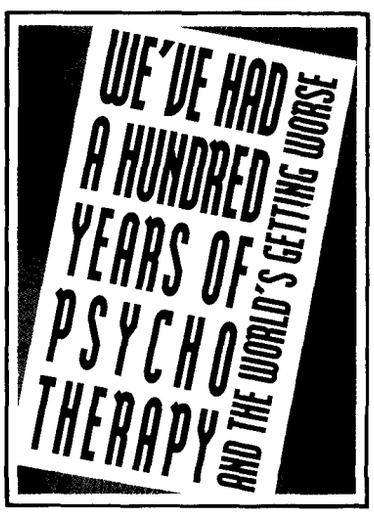

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issues of race or the resentments that blacks feel toward whites, Wolfe concentrates on how his hero's loyalties and prejudices, if not his musical tastes, are determined by family background.

The "jam" in Wolfe's title has three distinct meanings—as a riff on Jelly's name, as a reference to his music, and as a description of the circumstances in which he finds himself at the beginning of the play. We first see Jelly—born Ferdinand Le Menthe Morton into a New Orleans family of Creole gentry—on the eve of his death, rising on an elevated platform, his back to the audience. Jelly is being arraigned by a Mephistophelian figure known as the Chimney Man for betraying his own people. Declaring that the jazz movement that Jelly helped to create was the expression of messengers "torn from their native soil," the Chimney Man indicts Jelly as a "messenger who thought he was the message," for exalting his own role while denying the race that inspired his music. Now it is time for Jelly, standing at the corner of "Cadaver Avenue and Last Gasp Lane," to tell his tale and save his soul before being doomed to perpetual damnation.

As a young man, Jelly is torn between the demands of his aristocratic family, who make him practice classical piano, and the more colorful enticements of Storyville, a world of washboard music, street dancers, and high yeller women—on the one side, his picture-framed ancestors and domineering Grandmother, on the other, Miss Mamie (the Queen of Rampart Street) and Buddy Bolden, who "played notes only colored folk in heaven could hear." To his and our delight, this proper boy is soon debauched by black sin, "jammin' with niggers and messin' with whores." Circulating through pool rooms, dance halls, and brothels from Chicago to East St. Louis, "lover of women, inventor of jazz, and owner of twenty-seven suits," he is eventually featured in the supper clubs as "Jelly Roll Morton and his Red Hot Peppers," where he falls for a club owner named Anita. The obstacle to their love is Jelly's disdain for negritude. Anita believes that "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," but the light-skinned Jelly, consumed by jealousy, insults his closest friend by handing him a red bellboy coat and telling him to open doors for white folk "like a good li'l nigger."

Eventually, despite some success in Tin Pan Alley, Jelly's music is supplanted by the new sounds emanating from the horn of Louis Armstrong and others. But by play's end the Chimney Man—"the concierge of my soul"—redeems him as a figure of myth, despite the cruelty he has caused by "the black self-hatred thing," establishing Jelly in the pantheon of great jazz musicians along with Ellington, Waller, and Armstrong. His roots are stronger than his prejudices: "Inside every note of his is what he came from, who he is."

Jelly's Last Jam is more morality play than musicalized biography; but despite the insistence of its theme, it is crammed with meat, spice, and juice. Because Jelly is played by Gregory Hines, he makes an impression as a dancer rather than a piano man—but what a dancer! In two-steppers with his younger self, brilliantly performed by the agile Savion Glover, Hines has choreographed numbers of such dazzling virtuosity that they join the great tap dance tradition of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Charles "Honi" Coles, which reached its apogee in vintage musicals of the '30s and '40s. (My very first theater experience, as a child of 9, was *Swinging the Dream*, a jazz version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Robinson, Maxine Sullivan, and Armstrong; it closed in four days and determined the course of my life.) With his mournful demeanor and vaguely ophthalmic insinuating eyes, Hines establishes a relationship with the audience that is nothing short of illicit. And when his feet start moving, he is into a dimension of sheer animal grace. Mesmerizing, too, is the Chimney Man of Keith David, a species of strutting basso usually played by Geoffrey Holder, and enacted here with menacing intensity and virility.

The women on stage are equally sensual and alluring. Mamie Duncan-Gibbs, Stephanie Pope, and Allison M. Williams as a singing-dancing group called the Hunnies maintain the dignity of Thompson gazelles while delivering such ribald numbers as "Lovin' Is a Lowdown Blues" ("Lovin' is a fuck you blues"), while Mary Bond Davis, belting "Michigan Water" as Miss Mamie, possesses the raunch and grit of a latter-day Ma Rainey. The real find in the distaff cast, however, is Tonya Perkins as Anita, whose gumbo is served "hot—and over a bed of rice." A splendid actress and a fine musician, she sings "Play the Music for Me" and "Last Chance Blues" with the caustic melancholy of one who knows every last secret of sexual relations.

These jazz numbers, by the way, are by a variety of composers—not only Jelly Roll Morton but King Oliver, Walter Melrose, and Luther Henderson (who did the fine musical adaptation)—and Susan Birkenhead's new lyrics are seamlessly woven in with traditional blues. A final word of praise for the designers—Toni-Leslie James for costumes, Jules Fisher for lights, and Robin Wagner for sets (possibly the only Broadway setting this season not designed by Tony Walton). They provide a surround of energy and color that is a further testimony to George C. Wolfe's exhilarating command of the stage.

After *Jelly's Last Jam*, **Guys and Dolls** (at the Martin Beck) is something of a letdown, not because the Frank Loesser score and the Jo Swerling-Abe Burrows book are anything less than the classics we remember, but because Jerry Zaks's revival is inferior to the original show. We have been awaiting a major American version of this fabled musical for many years now, sustained only by an inferior movie (which miscast Marlon Brando and Frank Sinatra) and reports of occasional revivals abroad. Zaks, who alternates between cosseting the costumers (*House of Blue Leaves*) and pleasing himself (*The Marriage of Bette and Boo*), is back in an audience-kissing mood with *Guys and Dolls*. He delivers a lusty, animated, well-paced show, but a show without an underlife. Damon Runyon's grifters, gangsters, and gamblers are treated like characters out of the movie versions of *Batman* and *Dick Tracy* (Lt. Brannigan even wears Tracy's electric yellow overcoat and fedora); and New York, in Tony Walton's arch design of humanoid skyscrapers and winking subway stations, resembles nothing so much as the Toon

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Town of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

Take the character of Nathan Detroit, originally played by Sam Levene as a gravelly, world-weary sharpster with a pencil-stripe mustache and a pin-striped suit. In the hands of Nathan Lane, the stripes have widened but the performance has narrowed. Lane is an appealing actor who knows how to zing Burrows's proto-Mamet dialogue with one-liner expertise, but he lacks the seasoning for this part, the life experience. Whatever his age, he's too boyish. Faith Prince has been widely praised for her performance of Adelaide, and she certainly knows how to belt her songs, especially "Take Back Your Mink" and that syncopated celebration of postnasal drip called "Adelaide's Lament." But her quarrels with Lane make them sound like the Mertzes in "I Love Lucy." Vivian Blaine brought more womanliness to the part, and considerably less sourness. Jose de Guzman as the Salvation Army lass Sarah has a speaking voice like a car alarm system and a singing voice like a klaxon. Hard-edged and mechanical, she turns the love scenes with Sky Masterson into peanut brittle. As Masterson, Peter Gallagher alone makes an effort to invest his character with some inner life. Not ideally cast as a working-class New Yorker, he nevertheless manages to evoke the weary wariness of a young Bogart, and—despite a costume (blue pin-striped suit, blue suede shoes, white tie, and black fedora) that tries to create him in the image of another cartoon—he's the only one on stage who seems to have walked real streets.

Still, *Guys and Dolls* is probably actor-proof and director-proof (it's certainly critic-proof), and this revival undoubtedly has its charms. Shamelessly looted from the Bertolt Brecht-Dorothy Lane-Kurt Weill musical *Happy End* (which in turn stole a page from Shaw's *Major Barbara*), the tale of a gambler redeemed by a Salvation Army lass is basically irresistible, and the Loesser music remains one of the best scores in American musical comedy history. Few people since the premiere in 1950 have been able to shoot dice without humming "Luck Be a Lady," and, though Walter Bobbie lacks Stubby Kaye's rotund charm as Nicely Nicely Johnson, "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" remains a vibrant show-stopper. If I appear less than wild about this revival, it's because I don't much like seeing it through the mist of movies, television, and other screens that have since been beclouding our apprehension of human life on this planet. •

Chipmunk Serenade

BY JAMES WOLCOTT

The Age of Missing Information by Bill McKibben

(Random House, 261 pp., $20)

Knocking TV is nothing new. Since its inception, television has been considered a mental retardant—chewing gum for the eyes. Emanating from an altar in the living room, TV was the boomers' baby sitter, providing a visual pit. But as its influence widened and deepened, TV was elevated from a minor time-killer to a major menace. The tiny sandbox became "a vast wasteland." For forty years responsible words have warred with reckless images. Television has been accused of hyping violence, peddling sex, commodifying affection, junkpiling history, polluting the political process, and estranging us from our bodies, turning us into a nation of Jell-O molds.

It has been called a malignancy (Norman Mailer), an addictive drain (Marie Wynn, *The Plug-In Drug*), a Frankenstein monster boasting a bullet-proof vest of irony (Mark Crispin Miller). Neil Postman warned us about *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. A former advertising man, Jerry Mander, mustered *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. So the trail that Bill McKibben walks in his new book has seen many moccasins. A humble paleface, he honors his forefathers: in his acknowledgments he cites the scuff marks of Miller, Mander, Postman, David Marc, Ron Powers, Todd Gitlin, Tom Shales, Walter Goodman, "and a great many others [who] have written incisively about television." Take a bow, guys!

McKibben's focus, however, is different. "I don't fret about TV because it's decadent or shortens your attention span or leads to murder," he writes. His forefathers have already compiled that

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rap sheet. What concerns him is that the sheer torrent of TV-babble blots out nature's quieter counsel. We have made a fetish out of technological expertise. "There are lessons, enormous lessons, lessons that may be crucial to the planet's persistence as a green and diverse place and also the happiness of its inhabitants—that nature teaches and TV can't." The truly informed man is not a media analyst, he is nature's interpreter.

Along with Wendell Berry, McKibben's hero is Thoreau, whose lone firm voice has endured as hard and faceted as an Indian arrowhead. "[It's] not as if *we* need to know every jot and tittle in order to act—cranky old Thoreau is a useful witness in the matter." McKibben reminds us that Thoreau didn't need a lot of newsprint to convince him to commit civil disobedience over the Mexican war. "His protest was based on small amounts of information fed, in long hours of wilderness reflection, through the mill of principle." But cultural criticism is secondary in the mill of principle that is *The Age of Missing Information*. This wilderness reflection is really McKibben's personal odyssey, his spiritual greening from boy wonder to barefoot nature boy. His sincerity works overtime in these pages. He tugs at his forelock so hard he loosens his brains.

He first began to acquire his halo when he was at Harvard. While a writer at the *Crimson*, McKibben received a favorable nod from *The New Yorker*'s holy of holies, its legendary editor William Shawn. Future survivors of global warming may find it hard to fathom the hushed awe that attended Shawn, whose ultra-tactful utterances created a fog as fine as Henry James's. But it was rare indeed for Shawn to beam upon a budding prospect. It usually took years to climb the cobwebs of those hallowed halls.

Shawn may have spotted in McKibben a junior version of his own sainted impulses, as he had earlier in Jonathan Schell, whose drumbeat conscience was as far from A.J. Liebling's buffet style as you could get. Shawn was more comfortable with colorless lecturers than he was with loose-livers. Despite *The New Yorker*'s lacquered finish as an advertising vehicle (remember how obscene the critics found the glossy ads surrounding John Hersey's report on Hiroshima?), Shawn himself shunned any sense of "show." His office chair had a ripped cushion. A bit of a Buddha behind his banker's vest, Shawn was searching for a student he could teach the Tao of non-attachment, and he found his little grasshopper in McKibben. There was even talk that Shawn was grooming McKibben as his heir, should the day ever come that his spirit would have no further need of this clumsy package we call our body. (He had earlier tried to nominate Schell as his successor, only to have the staff awaken from a deep sleep and threaten a die-in.)

At first McKibben contributed humor pieces to the magazine, back when he still considered a sense of humor appropriate. But he soon realized that the Reagan-era streets were no fun arcade. They were a heartless place, full of hunger, poverty, falling bricks, and crack vials. He began writing "Talk of the Town" pieces that conveyed his dismay. His solutions tended to be quixotic. It was rumored to be McKibben who urged the readers of *The New Yorker* to adopt a homeless person. In a sense, he was extending Shawn's creed of sheltering the unfortunate: with so many unpublished and unpublishable lost souls on its payroll (not to mention wandering around loose in the building), *The New Yorker* was already a haven for the homeless. But New York is no place to keep your idealism intact. After Shawn was dethroned, McKibben quit. For a time he discussed starting a magazine with Schell, who had also thrown in the hankie, but the project never gelled. No matter. McKibben's subsequent career is proof that it's easier to take the boy out of *The New Yorker* than it is to take *The New Yorker* out of the boy.

Like many a *New Yorker* writer—E. B. White set the precedent—McKibben forsook the city. With his wife, the writer Sue Halpern, he moved to the Adirondacks. There he found roots. There he found community. (He teaches at the local Sunday school.) He wrote *The End of Nature*, a New Age lament over the lost virginity of our land and water. It resembled Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, to which it was inevitably compared (both had been excerpted in *The New Yorker*), but was woollier in its reporting. His wife also cupped an ear to the silence around her: she recently published *Migrations to Solitude* (Pantheon), a study of people who have opted out of what Satchel Paige called the social ramble. In a brief favorable note, *The New Yorker* said of her book, "The stories are loosely related, and are not necessarily out to prove anything." Talk about trying to tie your shoelaces with spaghetti!

The Age of Missing Information is likewise something of a limp, well-meant meander. But McKibben does have something to prove, something obvious. After he and his wife landed in the Adirondacks, they found that the mountains muscled aside television signals. "Even with a big antenna you get mostly snow. Since necessity is the mother of acquiescence, TV proved a fairly easy habit to kick." His sloughing off of TV, then, was no act of renunciation, but an atmospheric fluke. And then came an idea that can only be called high-concept. Unable to watch TV up there in backpack country, McKibben had friends tape the entire broadcast spectrum of the Fairfax, Virginia, cable system for May 3, 1990:

> I chose Fairfax solely because of the astounding size of the system, which in 1990 was roughly 40 percent larger than its nearest competitor. There were five Christian channels, four shopping channels, two country music video channels, even a channel that broadcasts all the arrival and departure information of the Dulles and National airport screens.

One hundred and three stations in all, providing a panoptic scan of American media culture. What was the point of stockpiling this stash? It was to answer the question, "What keeps me more truly in touch with the world—watching all this TV, or taking a simple walk in the woods?"

As shipments of cassettes began arriving in cardboard boxes, McKibben camped in front of the set until he got itchy all over. "I spent eight-hour days for many months watching cartoons and soap operas and shopping channels and televangelists, and at times it left me crotchety and irritable," he admits, which coming from him is pretty strong talk. But it doesn't occur to him that watching taped broadcasts by the bulk-load is akin to eating boxes of stale crackers. A true TV buff knows that a Johnny Carson monologue, say, loses its snap when seen in replay the next morning. Watching last week's "Today" show or last night's "Nightline" is like leafing through an old magazine; even the colors seem to have faded somewhat. (Tape degrades the image.) And watching a whole mess of tapes multiplies this lack of immediacy. The umpteen-thousand hours of TV he subjects himself to make for an artificial glut.

Why do I say "umpteen"? Because McKibben himself doesn't have a consistent tally of how much tape he actually clocked. In the uncorrected galleys of the book, he says he collected "nearly two thousand hours" of footage. In the finished book, he scales this down to "more than a thousand hours." But on the flap copy he claims a solid "two thousand hours." So his methodology is shaky. But there are also factual mistakes, such as confusing Wally of "Leave It to Beaver" with Ricky of "Ozzie and Harriet" (cf. p. 180). At one point he

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even brackets "The Honeymooners" with "Playhouse 90" as examples of "quality TV" in the '50s Golden Age, when everyone knows "The Honeymooners" was a short-run, low-rent sitcom that reached its classic status later in syndicated rerun.

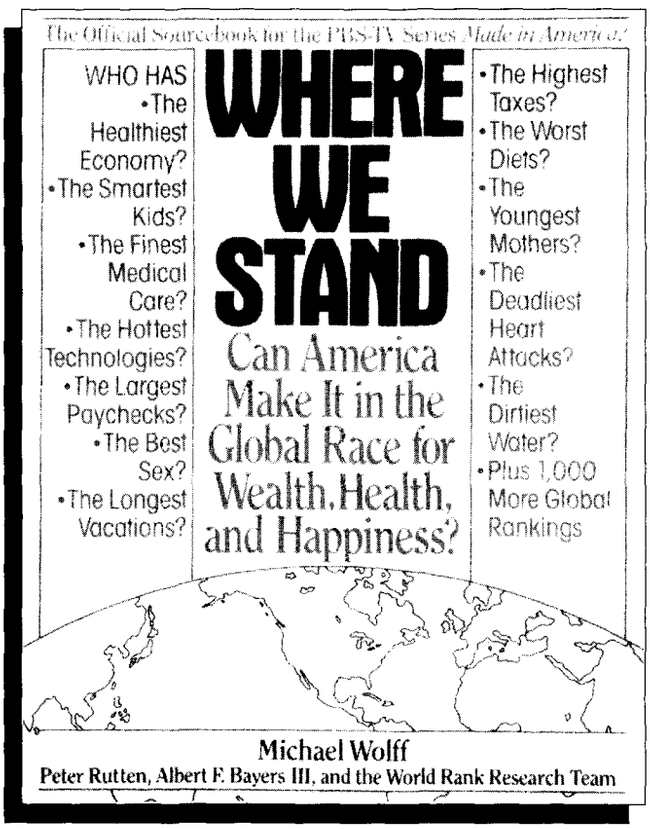
In the 1950s "quality TV" meant drama, and drama meant Norman Corwin, Paddy Chayefsky, Reginald Rose, Rod Serling. McKibben's fuzziness is perhaps understandable. By not watching TV on an easygoing, selective basis, *like a normal person*, he condemned himself to glazed eyeballs. But for all his eight-hour shifts at the small screen, there are glaring holes in his programming. How can you cover television and *not* write about "Roseanne," "Law & Order," "Northern Exposure," "The McLaughlin Group," or, my personal favorite, "Baywatch"? That's a lot of lapse.

If he were the arguing kind, McKibben might contend that he isn't sifting through a mass of material but immersing himself in an electronic stream, treating television as a continuous strip. Hence he doesn't delve into any show in detail. He doesn't employ critical hierarchies of taste. Instead he favors the pseudo-Barthelme collage-montage technique of his friend and fellow *New Yorker* writer George W. S. Trow, whom he thanks in the acknowledgments:

> Precision-minted pewter medallions celebrating former President Reagan are available for $10 on the Nashville Network. "Tums tastes like chalk," proclaims an ex-Tums user. On "McHale's Navy," all leaves have been canceled until annoying enemy pilot Washing Machine Charlie can be silenced, much to McHale's disgust. ("If he's a menace, I'm a ring-tailed goony bird," he declares.) Hans, a Dutch national, prepares a creamy Gouda sauce to drizzle over cauliflower for the A&E audience. A harrowing documentary on the Howard University station documents the British genocide of Tasmanian aborigines, right down to the last man, whose skeleton hangs in the Oxford Museum. Richard Simmons introduces his brother Larry, who used to weigh 205 pounds: "Here I was only 42 and I felt 52, maybe 62." There's terrible flooding in Texas—on the "Today" show, a woman is plucked off the roof of her submerged car by a helicopter.

Providing breathing space between these montages are slower passages in which McKibben loads his canteen and communes with nature, climbing a peak he calls Crow Mountain. Here I must confess to an aversion. Whether it is Edward Hoagland peddling upstream or Edward Abbey admiring his own orneriness, nature writing has always bored me blank. It's such a

It's worse than you think...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sexless genre, all this male sensibility on safari. When it comes to prose, I prefer to be in town, where the people are. But at least Hoagland and Abbey slip some grit into their granola. McKibben's chipmunk serenade assumes the childlike reverence of a field-trip edition of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." "A little mist hangs above the pond, which is still save for a single mallard paddling slowly back and forth." Sometimes he sits on a rock a-thinking. But even into this perfect retreat, the outside world pokes its head: "While I was resting by the pond, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait." Bummer, man. On the last page, however, the saving epiphany arrives on schedule. As the noise of the world narrows to an insect hum, the mallard breasts the mist to meet the morning sun . . .

In its split-screen look at wildlife going about its business while TV anchors us to the armchair, *The Age of Missing Information* is an extension of Michael Arlen's *New Yorker* essay "The Lame Deer." "Here we are, after all, gathered in this windowless room watching filmed scenes of distant animals while actual animals wandered about in the fields below, begging for attention," Arlen had written. In a nutshell, that's pretty much McKibben's take too, this contrast between indoor escape and outdoor embrace.

The central opposition of this book is between mute Crow Mountain and the motormouth media. Dramatically it's no contest, since McKibben's sympathies are with the mountain from the outset. (For a loyal son of the American naturalist tradition, it could hardly be otherwise.) And intellectually it's no stretch, since McKibben's point is so fundamental. Contrary to the title of McKibben's book, it isn't information that's missing in the media age, but context, perspective—an ability to see the forest for the trees. Stating the obvious, he says, "We say 'information' reverently, as if it meant 'understanding' or 'wisdom,' but it doesn't. Sometimes it even gets in the way."

In the way of what? McKibben states that the audiovisual data unleashed by television isolate us from the sustaining rhythms of nature. We've lost the bedrock harmony of our elders, the ability to read the clouds, chart the stars, churn our own butter. Aiming great lenses into the galaxies, we've lost our humility. Nature teaches us that man is small, he says. Far from the madding crowd, making his own migration into solitude, McKibben is at one with his nothingness:

> Human beings—any one of us, and our species as a whole—are not all-important, not at the center of the world. That is the one essential piece of information, the one great secret, offered by any encounter with the woods or the mountains or the ocean or any wilderness or chunk of nature or patch of night sky. I can sit on the knob above the pond and see the hills stretch off into the blue-gray distance; I can hide myself quiet on the edge of the glade and watch the deer and the chipmunks and the birds and the flowers and the old tree rotting; I can lie on my back and watch the hawks circle—and I would be fool to think this had anything to do with me . . .

Whereas the media never stop harping on *me, me, me*:

> The consumer society, exemplified by television, is obsequious in its attentions, and promises you all happiness. [The] mountain is indifferent. It promotes a brand of existentialism—it's hard, sitting on a mountain, to think that there's some great and exalted and sensible reason for your presence on this planet. But, it's a joyful existentialism, because we so clearly can fit in—because the world in which we're inexplicably thrown is magnificent, sweet. It's within our power, too, to leave much of it alone. To witness its rightness.

To preserve its rightness, we need to scale back on our ravenous appetites. Suffice, suffice, McKibben seems to say. His sense of simplicity is rather simplistic. We could bike to work, he says, make our own corn. Our pop music could stream "*values*" (his italics) over buttwiggle. But if the planet really is in the dire straits that he depicts (thinning ozone, spreading poverty, rampant cynicism), isn't an even more radical restructuring needed? Otherwise all you get are artsy-craftsy gestures, like this gem:

> Almost no one suggests *abolishing* electricity—but a nation where nightfall meant a bulb or two and the elegance for *romance*, that's not so obviously ludicrous. We light candles for *romance*, for special occasions. Perhaps lighting them two or three times a week instead of turning on lamps and televisions would greatly increase the percentage of our lives that are romantic and special. Certainly it would let us see the sunset and the dark more easily; certainly it would cut down the light bill.

It might be useful to recall that Thoreau once managed to start a fire that burned 300 acres of forest, haughtily refusing to help fight it. (In part it was his neighbors' lingering resentment that exiled him to Walden Pond.) So I'd be careful with those candles if I were you, nature boy.

Essentially *The Age of Missing Information* is a sermon in the guise of an investigation, a half-baked loaf of goofiness from a yuppie in a flannel shirt. As Emerson wrote, "Your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none." Emerson is greater than Thoreau because he went beyond the practical. He saw man as more than a posturing speck. What's missing from *The Age of Missing Information* is A Vision.

JAMES WOLCOTT writes regularly for *Vanity Fair.*

Yankee Gnostics

BY ALFRED KAZIN

The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation by Harold Bloom

(Simon and Schuster, 288 pp., $22)

When last reported, 175,440,000 American adults described themselves as adhering to some organized body of religious worship. Among Christians, forty-two separate denominations are listed, including "Open Bible" and "Four Square." There are always new variants in the sacred groves of our ever abundant American spirituality (not all California-engendered), New Age and contra New Age. My favorite just now is *Creation Spirituality*, which is still just a magazine but is directed by a sometime priest.

With so many contrasting forms, beliefs, and rituals of worship, it must take remarkable confidence and insight to say just what "the American religion" is, and presumably always has been. We are not involved here in the usual disgusted American bar talk: "You know, Jack, the American religion is nothing but ____." (This, too, has its many denominations.) Nor are we positing any one creed, like Mormonism, as the American religion just because it was once peculiar to America—although Mormonism is central to Harold Bloom's book, or at least its founder is.

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Joseph Smith Jr., taken out of jail by an Illinois mob in 1844 and murdered when he was 38, is one of Bloom's heroes, a religious genius who can be ranked with his other select geniuses—Emerson, Whitman, William James (the full list will appear in a moment), and Edgar Young Mullins, his favorite Southern Baptist theologian.

Having said what *the* American religion is not—at least not in this book—it is a strange task to say what it is, for Bloom. For the book is less an objectively considered study of the vital subject of religion in America than it is a personal manifesto. Bloom's gifts are remarkable by any standard, especially those of his fellow professors. He is an original among critics, and especially an original among intellectuals born in the (now extinct) Jewish working class. He feels himself totally superior to politics and to the most obvious social themes and conflicts within the novel, a form that has never engaged him as poetry and visionary literature do.

What is most remarkable about Bloom is his increasing sense of himself as one of the sacred company that he writes about. He began as a crack student and an apostle at Yale of romanticism's creative myths in Blake and Shelley—in opposition to the heavily Christian influence there of Eliot and the New Criticism. He has continued not only to add a whole antinomian line of Americans to his "visionary company," his household gods (Emerson, Whitman, William James, Stevens: there are always new names, but he never drops the old ones), but also to identify himself with them.

It is this that makes it so difficult to say very precisely what *The American Religion* is about. My chief image of the book is Bloom interrogating American religions to find just where he, in his exceptionality as a "Gnostic Jew," fits in. His search has been answered. Gnosticism is

> the hidden religion of the United States, the American Religion proper. Peculiar as this must sound, all any among us need do to begin to understand Gnosticism is to ask ourselves: What do I actually regard my innermost self as being? In that secret place, Ronald Reagan and the characters of Thomas Pynchon's fiction blend together.

To understand what Bloom is so hurriedly getting at here, you have to see that he is, philosophically, the total romantic. The core of romanticism has always been the superiority of the "inner," even "innermost," self. It is "secret" because it seems to be separated from the mundane world, hard to grasp

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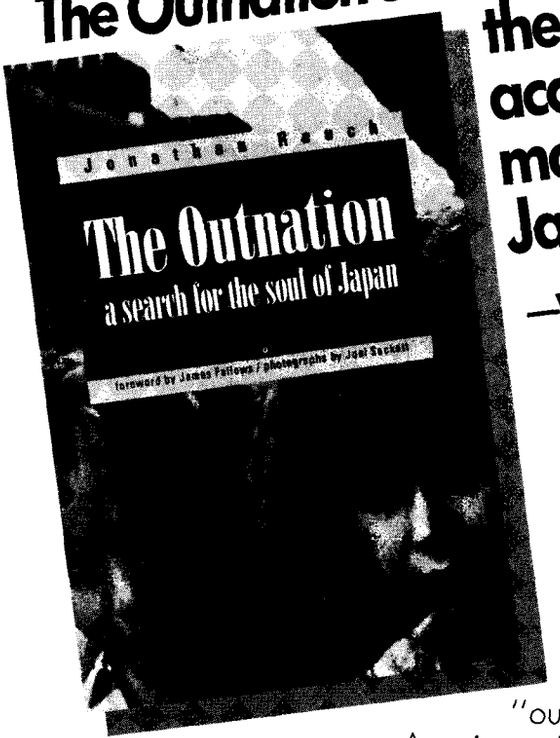

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—**Mark Memmott, *USA Today***

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The Outnation
A Search for the Soul of Japan
Jonathan Rauch
Foreword by James Fallows

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in itself even for those spellbound by its religious and occult operations. It is secret, too, because it is so mercilessly imaginative—like dreams—that the most unexpected images can ride us there. Thomas Pynchon is the most subversive caricaturist of America. Ronald Reagan is a fitting symbol of the debasement of power that Pynchon writes about.

Of course Bloom doesn't have to give us historical evidence that American religious thought ever conceived of itself as corresponding to Gnosticism, which was the dualistic, essentially anti-Christian second-century mystery cult, with touches of the early Kabbalah, whose chief feature was its distinction between the mere creator of the world, the Demiurge, and the true God, to be recalled within our occult selves, whom the Demiurge displaced. It is enough for Bloom to tell us that "Gnosticism takes its origins in a strong reaction against or creative misreading of an overwhelming precursor, the Hebrew Bible." We are in familiar territory. Bloom does not like Yahweh any more than Blake did. Blake's vision of our true world, a spiritual world recovered only by the poetic imagination, is a tremendous thing for Bloom. It is why he is enthralled by prophecy and so good on poetry (when it is his kind of poetry) and it gives him, in his embattled independence, a feeling of belonging to a tradition—Emerson, Whitman, and other visionaries and poets.

But is this tradition Gnostic because Bloom confers its attributes on whatever he sees in American religion as his particular tradition and as particularly American? Are the Mormons and the Southern Baptists—his prime examples of the American religion—believers not in "the high god of the Hebrews," but "in the alien or true God of the Gnostics ... identified with the primordial Abyss, the void and deep from which the Hebrew God or Demiurge stole or displaced the stuff for his false creation"? Of course it has never occurred to these American sects to think of themselves as "Gnostic." To hear that there is a war between the Demiurge who created the physical world and the true-spirit God who dwells in our hearts is not exactly what lifts a good Christian on Sunday morning.

How can Bloom argue that the essentially American sects are Gnostic without their knowing it? Easy. Gnosticism was so intensely critical of established Christian dogma that it became a kind of interior Christianity. It is a fundamental proposition of this book that "the American Religion, which is so prevalent among us, masks itself as Protestant Christianity yet has ceased to be Christian." In short, there is a surface Christianity and there is an interior Christianity that is all the more real, Gnostic-like, because it is all so "within" as to be essentially private—like the religion of Harold Bloom. "The American finds God in herself or himself, but after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude." A prevalent word in this book is the "loneliness" of the American religion.

Theological doctrines in themselves, especially when they project dramas of what goes on in the spiritual or everlasting world, are formal myths supported by constituencies that live or die by their imaginative truth. Bloom is a fascinated reader of such myths on American soil. Describing himself as having "the authority of a lifetime spent in apprehending the visions of great poets and original speculators," he finds visions of equal depth in Joseph Smith. Bloom's boundless admiration for Smith seems to be drawn not from the unreadable Book of Mormon, not from any actual Smith text, but from the scholarly literature about the Mormon Church.

The Latter-Day Saints, a denomination once so feared by Americans that it was safe in its final refuge only because Salt Lake City was so remote, are ultra-respectable, right-wing Republican, and a favorite with the FBI and other guardians of God's own country. Bloom notes this in passing, as he does the wealth of the Church, its missionary activities everywhere, the longevity of the faithful. He thinks it could become the major denomination in the next century. But it is Joseph Smith's myth-making about the necessary baptism of the dead that excites him, not the incorporation of already billions of names into that absolutely closed power structure whose drive led it to yield on polygamy but never on its own authoritarianism. Baptizing the dead has nothing to do with Gnosticism, but like Gnosticism, it is literally so unbelievable from the usual Christian point of view that "Gnosticism" provides the symbol for its shock to the outside world.

Yes, initiates believe in religious myths precisely because they offer pictures that are unanswerable. But does Bloom think that the Mormon Church owes its growth to the thinking of Joseph Smith, whose beliefs were full of borrowings and holy impersonations, rather than to the monumental self-assurance so important to the many anxious souls searching for something, for anything, to hold on to in a secular society as fearful and anxious as ours?

"Mormons today are not my subject," Bloom admits. His haughty indifference to the active social reality surrounding religious opinions makes me giddy. He thinks Bush's opposition to abortion is sincere, and that Bush owes his current view to his "spiritual instructors." Surely anyone who knows anything about Bush's career as a moderate Republican and his family's support of Planned Parenthood knows that Bush turned himself completely around when the right took over the Republican Party.

Similarly, when Bloom retraces the history of the Southern Baptists, his only truly "American" rival to the Mormons, he leaves out the fact that they became "Southern" because they justified slavery against their Northern brethren. The conflict over slavery had as powerful an effect on American religion as it did on politics. There is nothing about this in Bloom's book, though, because he always goes for the arcane. He is sure that African-American mystery cults entered the mainstream religion. He sees that "the crushing of the Confederacy by superior force led to a trauma in the Baptist spirit, evidently a more severe aftershock than the other Southern denominations experienced." He thinks this mysterious, and his only explanation is that "the Baptists were unique in having no founder, no overwhelming visionary and leader in their past." The actual fact was this: just as the Southern Baptists had provided the most traditional biblical justifications for slavery, so after the war this largest Southern Church took on the central agony role. Charles Reagan Wilson of the University of Mississippi called his valuable book on the "religion of the lost cause" *Baptized in Blood.*

In the conclusion to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James made it clear that he believed in religion because it was a mainstay for suffering souls like himself. At the same time, he could find no reason for believing in "God." Religion was a reaching out, released from the usually repressed urgings of our subliminal self, to all that was "more" than ourselves in the universe. James is another of Bloom's spiritual heroes, one of his sacred company. There are many references in this book to James's "experiential" religion. There is no mention, however, of the near suicidal despair that brought James to think that religion was a prime human exercise, even if faith was often difficult. The life of religion, to paraphrase Oliver Wendell Holmes, has been not the "logic" of theology, but rending human experience. Perhaps

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that is true even of the theologians themselves. But theologians don't necessarily recognize the subjective sources of their doctrines, the personal wishes they put into their dream-pictures of the spiritual world. What is so curious about a book that claims to know "the American religion" is that it is so exclusively concerned with religious myths, so removed from the human needs to which every religion purports to answer.

ALFRED KAZIN is writing *The Almighty Has His Own Purposes: God and Man in Modern American Writing.*

Unnatural Curiosity

BY HERMIONE LEE

The Gates of Ivory by Margaret Drabble

(Viking, 464 pp., $22)

Almost at the end of this ending of a trilogy—*The Gates of Ivory* follows *The Radiant Way* (1987) and *A Natural Curiosity* (1989)—two characters are pushed out of the concluding scene. They are in the wrong novel. "They belong to a different world and a different density. They have wandered into this story from the old-fashioned, Freudian, psychological novel.... There is not time for them here." So closure is refused, any idea of a climax dissipated in the possibility of other stories that might have been told. This apologetic, even embarrassed narrator has been making her presence felt in all three books. In *A Natural Curiosity* she says that the reader may know more about one of the characters "than this story is able to tell." She forgets the age of another character, and asks you what you think a suitable ending for her might be. In *The Gates of Ivory*, she exhibits some queasiness about having "characters," "individuals," at all, in a story that (she ventures, equivocatingly) is "at least in part about numbers." In all three books, she asks very many rhetorical questions.

Narration in bad faith is a twentieth-century commonplace. But the insistently anxious, responsible voice that Drabble uses in her trilogy is distinguished by its nostalgia for moral authority, as though a truth-telling liberal humanist like George Eliot or E. M. Forster had been forced to dress up as a postmodernist. So, while the narrative keeps dismantling itself, we are learning lessons about life: "This was the lesson of the '80s.... Appetites have no natural limits. They cannot be sated."

The interest, as well as the problem, of the trilogy, which becomes particularly intriguing in the last and the best of the novels, is the gap between its personal materials and its conceptual ambitions. People die, marry, fall suddenly in love, get pregnant, gossip, give parties, grieve, and bicker, just as they used to in *A Summer Bird Cage* or *The Millstone*, back in the '60s when the Drabble "world" seemed so satisfyingly real to a generation of young, white, middle-class British women readers. The important thing now, Drabble insists, is not so much what people do as what they think. Or, rather, whether what they are thinking makes them do anything. Take the suicide of Vietnam veterans. "It makes one think. And Liz thought."

This ineffectual little paragraph is typical of the book's procedures. It seems irritating and fatuous. But after all, what do most of us *do* about what we ingest from newspapers and books and the media, from "the fermenting sludge" of world information? Like us, these characters mostly just think and talk about their weighty list of topics: world aid, genocide, war, refugees, governments. "They discussed ..." "They discussed ..." And meanwhile normal middle-class habits persist: Liz dips her amaretto into her black coffee while discussing Pol Pot, or wonders whether she can get to the store in time to buy semi-skimmed milk while "thinking about" massacres, crowds, and orphans.

In the first two novels, the seesaw between the habitual and the atrocious, the taken-for-granted and the alien, is meant to expose the frightening psychic roots of a nation's behavior under Thatcherism. *The Radiant Way* began on the eve of the 1980s, with the shedding of old opinions: "Stuffy woolly shabby old liberal vests and comforters were left piled on the shore ... the conventions were changing.... Change is painful."

Taking us deep into the lives of the homeless, Golden offers an original and incisive look at women whom society rejects, ignores, and fears.

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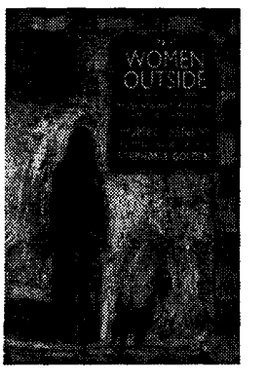

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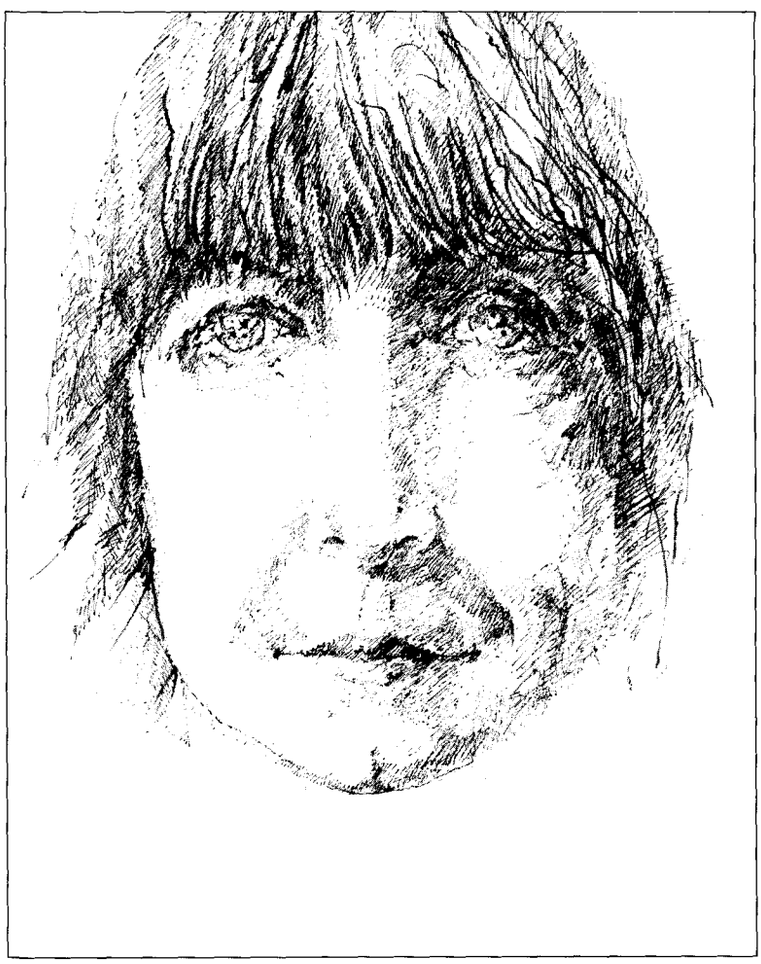
Through the preoccupations of its three middle-aged women characters—Liz Headleand, a (divorcing) psychotherapist; Esther Breuer, a solitary, secretive art historian; and Alix Bowen, married, left-wing, living in the north of England, who has become involved in visiting a psychotic murderer in prison—the fate of Britain under Thatcher is linked to obscure, private areas of fear and trouble.

But these relations—for example, between a national loss of compassion and an individual capacity for savagery—are rather awkwardly negotiated, and often the attempt to find connections between the dreadfulness of the individual and the society looks merely like a gripe at how nasty things are getting for right-thinking English liberals. In one passage in *A Natural Curiosity*, Liz's sister Shirley observes a motorway service station:

> The room is full of waifs, witches, grotesques. Shirley has never seen such a miserable collection of people, such a gallery of unfortunates. What has gone wrong? Is this some outing for the disadvantaged, the disabled? No, it is Britain, round about Budget Day, March 1987. Shirley is appalled. An immense obese woman spoons scarlet jelly from a cardboard dish. Two thin tall lanky youths devour a mountain of chips and swill from cans of coca-cola. A young couple with a baby, pale like convicts, glare into space as the baby wails and wails. An old man on crutches picks uneaten chips and crusts from the dirty plates on the passing conveyor belt.... Shirley does not know whether she feels sorry for these tramps, these refugees, these motorway wanderers, or whether she feels she has nothing to do with them at all. Is she still part of the human race? Is this the human race, or are these shadows, ghosts, lingering afterthoughts? This cannot be what is meant.

"The horror, the horror": but these atrocity stories (a recurring phrase in the trilogy) read parochially. A disgusted list of horrid sights in a cafeteria doesn't penetrate the essence of human evil. Drabble has a habit of using the word "deeply": "Stephen Cox's thoughts about human nature are deeply lonely"; "His mother was ... deeply, deeply self-centered"; "As a child, she had been deeply self-conscious." This is part of the novel's intentional chattiness, its fabrication of an intimate, even clumsy speaking voice. But it also suggests the fiction's anxiety about going deep.

Yet *The Gates of Ivory* makes a surprising leap. The same strategies are used as before—the discussions, the questions, the lists, the historically helpless present-tense narration. But this time they do seem to get us "deeper." The "unnatural curiosity" that pushes some of Drabble's characters beyond their habitual existences and assumptions into risky inquiries into evil or barbarism finds, here, a more challenging subject.



MARGARET DRABBLE BY DAVID SCHORR FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Edging quietly through the two earlier novels is the character of Stephen Cox. He is more radical than the others (in *The Radiant Way* he wants to abolish "all privileges, all titles, all honors, all degrees" ... "to establish equality of income, and see what happened"). He is romantic, nomadic (he reminds me rather of Bruce Chatwin), and full of the "fatal curiosity" that makes some people quest "beyond the limits of the known world" and come face to face with "the gorgon." Though his novel about the Paris Commune has won the Booker Prize, life as an English man of letters no longer appeals. When Liz offers him London life in the 1980s as material enough for a writer ("There's plenty of human nature here at home"), Stephen replies wistfully: "There is nothing to keep me here."

He seems to be repudiating, on behalf of his author, the very materials that have made her name—that have, indeed, given their name to a particular kind of fiction, the "Drabble novel." Now, instead, Stephen and his author cross the border from Good Time to Bad Time. "Some cross the bridge into the Bad Time, into the Underworld, and return to tell the tale. Some go deliberately. Some step into Bad Time suddenly. It may be waiting, there, in the next room."

The crossing of this border is deliberate and gratuitous. Stephen Cox turns his back on the Western world—and the thick, realist, humanist Western novel—in quest of Pol Pot. The motives for this quest are kept simple and hazy, so that generalized questions can be attached to it. Stephen Cox wants to find out what went wrong with Pol Pot's vision of "the greatest reconstruction project of the twentieth century," which was "to take Cambodia out of history, and make it self-sufficient." Like Alix Bowen with her murderer, he is fatally intrigued by evil, by "atrocity stories," and by theories of evil. (Hannah Arendt is mentioned, naturally, but not pursued; "evil" here seems more impenetrable than banal.)

Drabble frequently does her thinking here through literary analogies, Shakespeare and Conrad particularly, and *Heart of Darkness* provides a somewhat predictable model. But it is Conrad's treatment of the crowd, of savagery en masse, that is dwelt on (especially in his *Victory*), rather than the more obvious analogy of Stephen with Marlow and Pol Pot with Kurtz. Conrad raises the question of whether the individual is "progressive and flexible, while the mass is

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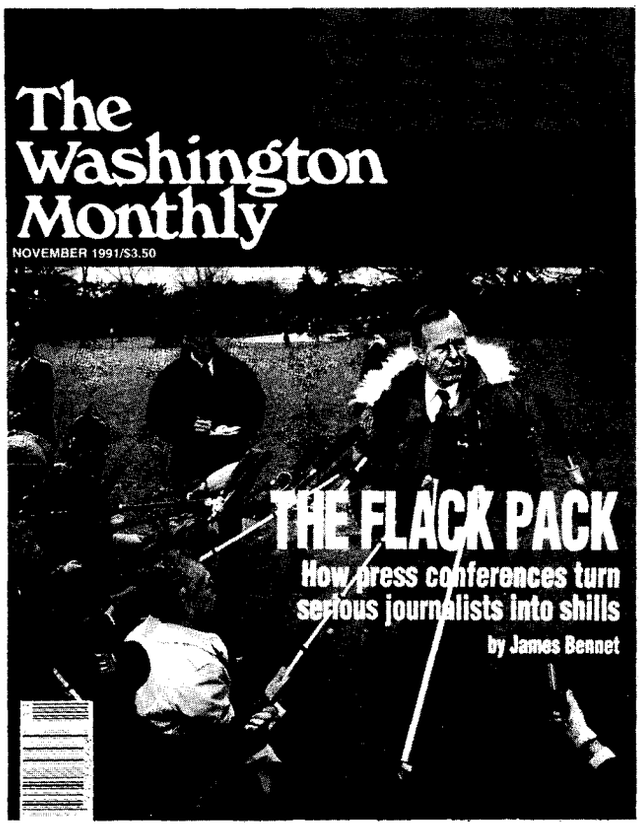

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primitive and punitive." "Was the charismatic leadership of Pol Pot a socializing influence, binding the exploited peasant of Cambodia into a purposeful society? Or was it a barbaric, primitive influence?" "Discuss," the passage ends, with that irritating and anxious drop into helplessness that is so often found in the novel. But what else can the novel do: Solve the questions?

The novelist's refusal to solve matches Stephen's failure to arrive. Instead he is helped and hindered, as in all Odyssean narratives, by a series of guides. The wonderfully alluring, ruthless, and improbable "Miss Porntip," whom he meets on the plane, inducts him into the material pleasures of Bangkok, where "it is not necessary to see poor people and horrid places." Miss Porntip's commitment to Good Time, conveyed in comically lyrical transworld English, is a victory over a harsh peasant family life. Her moment came, she says, with "the time of the economic power of the women." Winner of beauty contests, collector of jewels and lovers, she is interested in money, pleasure, and celebrity, and her tone is "light, neutral, quizzical." She inhabits the Land of Never Mind, and she is very well done.

Others of Stephen's mentors are not so hedonistic. Madame Savet Akrun, sitting in the Displaced Person's Camp, Site Ten, on the border near Aranyaprathet, hoping against hope for news of her son, who has probably been killed by the Khmer Rouge, provides Stephen with one story among the "thousands and thousands of separate, lost, intercrossing lives" in the border camps. Helen Anstey, a disillusioned ex-Marxist working in the camps, teaches him some plain facts. A Japanese journalist, Akira, hung about with high-tech gadgetry and yet fanatically utopian about the Khmer Rouge, urges him on. And the charming, popular, dangerous Konstantin Vassilou, free-lance photographer, at home all over the world, leads him further on his quest (for dubious personal reasons), and at the last abandons him.

"It is as though that small, expendable country, that hole in the map of the world, were trying to speak to them." At home, Stephen's friends hear nothing of him. Then Liz Headleand receives a mystery package—a piece of human bone, fragments of Stephen's writing, cryptic messages—that she must decode. This is where the novel starts. Like the reader, she has to retrace, and to understand, Stephen's journey. Questions of what is "real" dog her all the way.

Drabble has set herself a tricky job. She has to explain as much as possible about Cambodia while not seeming to do so. (As a result there are some rather stage-managed conversations about Angkor Wat, the refugee camps, American involvement.) She wants to make us interested in a disappearing character. And she means to make us think hard about numbers rather than about individuals. So we are tugged between the author's ruminations on her larger concerns and the lively voices of Miss Porntip or the perky, jokey Hattie Osborne, Stephen's last contact in England, who injects a good deal of brio into the London end of the novel. Some of these characters are allowed quite satisfying happy endings, but we aren't sure how much this is supposed to matter.

The effect of the whole enterprise is peculiar: irresolute, repetitive, awkward, but unexpectedly moving, perhaps because of its uncertainties. Drabble doesn't write a conclusive account of Cambodian history, any more than the earlier novels succeeded in accounting for Thatcherism. She can't, in the end, explain what evil is. But she does recognize how most of us perceive and respond to worlds that are alien to us. And her sadness is good, her haunted dreaming of what is lost or dead or irrecoverable. Even at its most stagy and formalized, her dialogue strikes a plangent note: "'I can't stick it all together.'" (Stephen says this to Miss Porntip, sounding like his author.)

> "Sex, politics, the past, myself, I am all in pieces."
>
> "Who can stick these things together? Why expect?" she demanded.
>
> "But in *me*," persisted Stephen, "the gaps are so *great*.... I have no cohesion.... I seek a land where the water flows uphill. I seek simplicity."
>
> "Is no simplicity. Is only way onwards. Is no way back to village. No way back to childhood. Is finished, all finished. All over world, village is finished. English village, Thai village, American village. Is burned, is chopped, is washed away. Is no way back wards. Water find level. Is no way back."

The novel takes its title from Homer's gates, through which the false dreams, the illusions, enter in the *Odyssey*. The real dreams, the prophetic ones, come through the gates of horn. But, though it doesn't call itself "the gates of horn" (since it is continually asking what is "real"), some truths do reach us through the gates of this uneasy, conscientious, self-doubting fiction. Truths, that is, not so much about politics or history as about what fiction can try for. The novel achieves a kind of gallant success out of failure. It cannot answer many of its own questions, but it knows how to ask them.

HERMIONE LEE is the author of *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (Vintage) and teaches English at York University.

Double Features

BY STANLEY KAUFFMANN

Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success by Joseph McBride

(Simon and Schuster, 768 pp., $27.50)

Joseph McBride has found out a great deal about Frank Capra and has set it down in a lucid, inviting way. His book unrolls like a well-told tale. Since Capra's film career began in 1915 and ended in 1961, his life encompassed a large chunk of Hollywood history, which McBride, the author of books on Orson Welles and Howard Hawks and a member of the *Daily Variety* film staff, handles comfortably. Outstandingly, however, his book deals with some questions that have bothered many viewers of Capra films.

McBride's aim was completeness, not debunking. Still, the examination of myths, about the man and about the films, was unavoidable. The very fact that he spends considerable time correcting misstatements in Capra's autobiography (*The Name above the Title*, 1971) is indication enough of what turned out to be a prominent part of McBride's job.

A sample at once, to set the tenor of the McBride-Capra relationship. All his life Capra maintained that he would rather have been the scientist he might have been, but that he fell easily—too easily—into filmmaking. Says McBride:

> Because of his disastrous showing in the first two-thirds of his junior year [at Throop College, later known as Caltech] ... Capra did not graduate with a degree in chemical engineering, despite his claims in *The Name above the Title* and elsewhere that he possessed such a degree.... The degree Capra

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received was a "general" Bachelor of Science degree.

He insisted in his autobiography that he had absolutely no interest in a movie career until 1921, when he directed a dramatic short.... He repeated the claim countless times in interviews.... It is an important part of his self-created myth that he was a cinematic innocent until he bluffed his way into the directing job because he needed money. But the truth is that Capra probably became interested in films by 1915, the year *The Birth of a Nation* changed everyone's thinking about the infant medium.

...his lifelong pretense that he was a gifted scientist who slipped into films because he needed money and was somehow trapped there, a pretense that persisted long after he became a world-famous director, suggests an embarrassment that was, until quite recently, intrinsically American. Science is serious, art—in this case, film—is not. "Please excuse me," Capra seemed to be saying all through his long life, "for having slid down from the serious and, what's worse, for having succeeded down there." McBride's subtitle, *The Catastrophe of Success*, is a phrase from an article by Tennessee Williams in which the dramatist deplored the changes in his life that celebrity wrought. For Capra, the catastrophe was not the destruction of privacy but the imprisonment in what he considered, or said he considered, second-rate eminence. (Possibly, too, by calling it second-rate, he magnified himself: a giant snared by pygmy accomplishments.)

This curvature of view may have occurred in Capra because he was an immigrant. He was born in a village near Palermo in 1897, into a large family that immigrated to the United States in 1903 and proceeded to Los Angeles because one of the family had already settled there. Proximity to the world's film headquarters may have been as influential on Capra as it was for some other film personages. (In high school he even had a teacher who was involved in films.) It is certainly possible that if he had grown up elsewhere he might never have sought out Hollywood. Familiarity, in film's home territory, often breeds attempt. But he may have felt, sooner and later, that a newcomer in the New World, bursting with opportunities, owed his new home something more than the Hollywood success that was virtually next door.

Before he got fixed in films, he worked at several other jobs. (He could play several instruments, and while he was still in high school he played the guitar on Sunday nights in an L.A. brothel.) But even while he was doing his science

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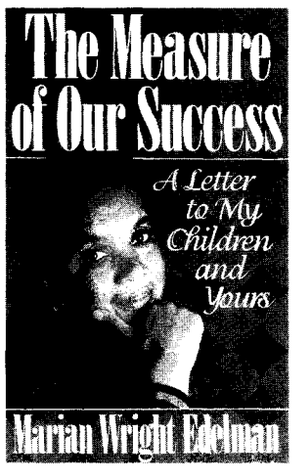

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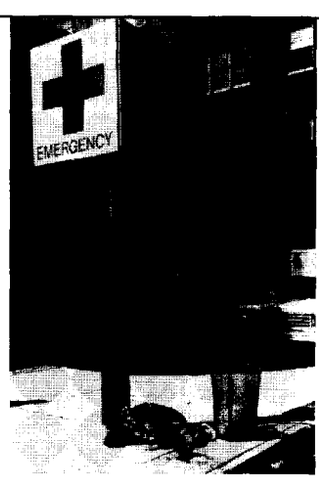

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work in college, he thought and wrote about films and did bits of film work. After college he did brief Army service in 1918. Then, immigrant obligation or no, science adulation or no, he got "his first verifiable full-time job in the movies."

That job, in 1919, was with a producer of slapstick comedies. He didn't obtain or prosper easily at this job, as he often claimed. This was just

> Capra's way of showing he was so brilliant that he could master his complex new medium without training and without the stumbles and false starts and humiliations that actually occurred. The true story of Capra's early film jobs is a story of sheer dogged persistence that shows his fictional story for what it is: a fairy tale.

In 1924, with the help of that high school mentor, he became a gag man for Hal Roach, who was recently seen taking a bow, aged 100, at the Oscar ceremonies. Then he moved to the studios of that insufficiently sung writer-director-producer of film comedy, Mack Sennett.

Gag writing is not the first occupation that one might associate with Capra (though there are traces of gaggery in his later films). He was no kind of blithe character, and his home life was nothing like the Sicilian sunniness of folklore. We might speculate that the practice he had already had in trying to find a way into the world around him—and a way to justify it to himself and others—led to some skill in the fantasizing logic of gag writing. But senses of humor, despite Freud, are never fully explicable.

FRANK CAPRA BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

At Sennett, he wrote principally for Harry Langdon, a comic star who, I hope, is not forgotten. When Langdon left Sennett in 1925, he took Capra with him, and in 1926 he gave Capra, who had already done some oddments of directing, his first feature—starring Langdon, of course—to direct, *The Strong Man.* (When I was a 10-year-old, I kept a diary for a few months. I've lost it, but I remember that the first entry was about *The Strong Man,* which I loved.) Paths diverged, and a couple of years later Capra went as a director, sans gag writing, to a then-minor studio called Columbia, where he worked for twelve years under Harry Cohn, a man who has become a legend of Hollywood brutality. (A brute Cohn inarguably was, but his film success is no puzzle. In 1933, when Capra proposed the off-beat subject of *Lady for a Day,* Cohn said, after a brief pause, "All I know is the thing's got a wallop. Go ahead." In 1934, when Capra made a picture called *Night Bus,* Cohn—over Capra's objections—changed the title to *It Happened One Night.*)

Capra's career, the Columbia years and after, has a certain resemblance to John Ford's. Ford is now known chiefly as a director of Westerns, although most of his films were not Westerns. Capra made many kinds of pictures, *Submarine* and *Dirigible* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* among them, but he is now known chiefly as a political populist, a rhapsodist of democratic principles, the immigrant repaying his debt to America by becoming its cinematic bard, and so on. In fact, this populist phase, salient though it was, began only in the 1930s when he met two screenwriters: Robert Riskin, a "moderate-liberal reformist" who wrote or co-wrote, among others, *American Madness* and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town,* and Sidney Buchman, a Communist, who wrote *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.* Thereafter, even in pictures with which those two men were not involved—*It's a Wonderful Life* and *State of the Union,* for instance—something of the Riskin-Buchman flavor persisted.

Had those two writers evoked latent beliefs in Capra? Did his Riskin-Buchman pictures truly represent the man? McBride thinks otherwise:

> He spurned his family and his ethnic heritage and scorned other members of the lower classes who were unable to rise as he had risen. He feared the Democratic reformers who, he felt, wanted to take his wealth and redistribute it to people who could not make it on their own.... And yet he could respond, for a time, to the ... beliefs of Robert Riskin. At the beginning it may have been that Capra was simply responding to the times: his '30s films sometimes espoused positions which he personally opposed, and under the pressure of the social unrest of the Depression he temporarily softened some of his conservative views.... Capra's championing of what he initially referred to as "The Man in the Street" ... in part was commercial calculation, a canny assessment of what played best at the box office in the age of Roosevelt. Like the popular artist he was, Capra was being led by his audience.

This last comment places the matter correctly, I think. There is a substantive difference between a callous cynic and a filmmaker who consciously puts his personal beliefs to one side in order to satisfy what he sees as the demands of the public and the profession. The Capra rationale is not a cause for jubilation, but in the cruelly expensive world of film it is not as craven as it might seem elsewhere, particularly if the results are good in themselves.

The schizoid Capra—professionally schizoid, we might say—is vivid in McBride's book. On the one hand, the benevolence in *Meet John Doe* and *You Can't Take It with You* (Capra ladled dol-

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lops of syrup into the original Kaufman-Hart play); on the other hand, the maker of those films, a man with almost every available prejudice, racial, religious, sexual. Perhaps the prejudices were aggressive-defensive after all the anti-Italian slurs he had endured. Still, it's hard to comprehend that the man whose first wife was Jewish (in time there was a second wife) and who had worked so closely with so many Jews cherished an anti-Jewish streak. Even toward the end of his life, after all his success, he could say, "I've had the fun of making pictures, but I haven't made any money. You have to be Jewish, or you're not going to get a goddamn thing." In Capra's case, that's not simple prejudice, it's deliberate nuttiness.

Possibly these jaundices continued to rankle because of the postwar troubles that grew out of his Riskin-Buchman association. During World War II, Capra headed the Army film unit that made the *Why We Fight* series and others, for which the Distinguished Service Medal was pinned on him personally by General Marshall. Yet within five years, when HUAC flourished in Hollywood, Capra was in trouble with officialdom because, among other reasons, the Soviet Union had used (their versions of) *Mr. Deeds* and *Mr. Smith* as anti-American propaganda. When he tried to re-enlist in the Army for a special film project, he had trouble getting clearance. Pressed to name names in those now incredible byzantine days, he complied "by collaborating surreptitiously with the witch-hunters," thus avoiding a public HUAC hearing. (That a man of his conservative beliefs was in political trouble in those days was not the only anomaly of the era.) All his life thereafter he suffered from what he called "the Judas pain."

Another presumable reason for his political troubles—and a further contradiction in Capra—was that, before World War II, he had been president of the Screen Directors Guild, although he favored the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Today the Academy is known only as a research center and as the bestower of Oscars, but it originated as a company union, devised and controlled by the moguls to stall off the inevitable organizing of Hollywood actors, writers, and directors." Memories of the Guild may have festered in the moguls despite Capra's position and, as they say, profitability.

After the political clearance, however, the fame and the profitability withered, and after 1961, when Capra remade *Lady for a Day* unsuccessfully as *A Pocketful of Miracles*, his mainstream career fell away. He devoted himself to his huge

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fruit ranch, to television documentaries, and tours. He made a great many public appearances here and, for the USIA, abroad, to promote democratic ideals and presumably to fix his own image as the people-loving American persona that Riskin and Buchman had helped to create for him. In his late years he suffered a series of strokes and was in pitiable condition when he died, at 94, in 1991.

McBride offers relatively little criticism of the films as such. He does provide some valuable comments from Capra co-workers on Capra methods. For example, Edward Bernds, a veteran colleague, kept a diary in 1936 during the making of *Mr. Deeds* in which he wrote:

> The Capra method: mechanical—very full of coverage of angles, from master shot to individuals—partial to angles shooting *over* foreground people to other (featured) people. Very crisp and decisive in setting up and shooting. His direction: continual emphasis on tempo. Over and over rehearsals, more the nature of "drill," but informalized so that there is no sense of "ten rehearsals," "twenty rehearsals," or rehearsed until stale.

Such glimpses reveal a director in complete command who knew how to work evocatively, rather than imperiously; and they are further interesting for two reasons. First, this glimpse is in pretty complete contrast to the dark, furrowed private man whom McBride shows us; thus it plainly implies that Capra himself was giving a performance on the set, being Mr. Sympathetic Nice Guy. This performance was apparently part of his directing technique. (Again, the schizoid Capra.) Second, Capra made a wise choice of roles for himself because the results can be seen in his pictures. Only one sample: Spencer Tracy gives one of his liveliest, warmest performances in *State of the Union.*

A few years ago I saw *Lost Horizon* again. Within the last few months I've reseen *The Strong Man* and eight of Capra's major films. As for *The Strong Man,* it may be hindsight that makes aspects of the directing look memorable, but hindsight is, after all, just one more kind of sight. Harry Langdon was a tentative-sensitive clown with a round white face and a small round hat, much more limited than Chaplin or Keaton but with his own exquisite timing and delicacy. In this film, a sequence in a bus must be given ample time, without cuts, so that Langdon can perform a certain set of actions with a passenger, actions possibly devised by Capra. The director understands the actor's need and—one of the marks of a truly good director—doesn't muck up things with cinematics; he gives Langdon the screen. (The other passenger, by the way, is a bit player named Brooks Benedict who reappears as a Senate clerk in *Mr. Smith* thirteen years later.)

The Strong Man also defines a negative and a positive in Capra. He had absolutely no gift for directing children. No child I've seen in any Capra film is anything but phony. But he had a passion for crowds, à la Max Reinhardt and Eisenstein, and he knew how to exploit them. He loved to choreograph masses of people, to make them flow around and past his camera. Those crowds—eventually called The People—are the life-giving current that brings rescue to the end of *American Madness* and *Mr. Deeds* and *Meet John Doe.* The crowd under umbrellas in the rain in the stadium is the most visually interesting sequence in *Meet John Doe.* It's Grandpa Vanderhof's relation with the neighborhood people in *You Can't Take It with You* that swings the finish: they appear in court to support their hero as they did in *Mr. Deeds.* The people of the hero's hometown surround him in *It's a Wonderful Life* like a woolly comforter. (Incidental oddity: an early draft of that maudlin film was written by Clifford Odets.)

A factor often overlooked in Capra's work becomes prominent when several of his films are seen more or less together: the importance of lighting. Capra became keenly interested in photography while still in high school, and he extended that interest in college. For many of his best films, Capra used Joseph Walker, one of the best cinematographers of the day, on whom he relied greatly and with whom, it can be said, he truly collaborated. The results are unostentatious but extraordinary.

In some instances, the very lighting of a scene is what sustains it. In *Mr. Deeds,* the sequences of Gary Cooper's melancholy toward the end are validated by the way they *look.* In *Broadway Bill,* a horse-racing story, only Walker's lighting provides the few tolerable moments. In *Mr. Smith,* lighting substantiates the night scene at the Lincoln Memorial in which Jean Arthur persuades James Stewart to stay in Washington and fight. Through the whole scene they are in quasi-silhouette, against the moderately illuminated monument behind them. It makes the moment intimate, close. The sheer fact that the two stars are not highlighted in the conventional way seems to strip the movieness from this sticky scene and give it conviction.

That episode, aside from its lighting, is typical of one aspect of what came to be called the Capra touch, scenes at the opposite end of the spectrum from crowd scenes. Such intimate fine-work would include: the scene in *Mr. Smith* between Stewart and James Gleason, with the sodden Gleason talking about large principles and trying to light a bent cigarette (a bit from Capra the gag man); the scene between Arthur and Thomas Mitchell in the same picture where, by proposing to him, she implies her love for Stewart (Howard Hawks, as McBride relates in his book-length interview with him, helped Capra on that one); and a scene that was a particular favorite of Capra's, the telephone duo in *It's a Wonderful Life* in which Stewart reluctantly-compulsively proposes to Donna Reed. These, and others like them, are instances that perform a double function, as set pieces and as dramatic integrants.

And there are scenes in which Capra

Ruby at Auction

(for Vickie Karp)

The question is, whose was it? Darker than
the finest quality Thai ruby; mined, most
likely, a century ago in Burma, this stone
—clear sight's happy obstacle—is not,

however, typically Burmese. Deeper than
the hue of pigeon's blood, oxblood bindings
on *The Collected Works Of*—, or Pomerol:
the setting is original. Mr. Block,

the auctioneer, is sure of this but shaky
on its provenance. Might as well say blood
will tell—he fans the cards, then picks.
The Mandalay? Seen last at Christie's, London,

eighteen-ninety-six? Decades gone, the stone
in its snowstorm of diamonds pocketed,
secreted, kept through hoop-rolling, Flanders'
poppy, the blitz. By now the jewel is pour

and tor, an owl's heart, a rosehip, gemology's
Gioconda, Mars in a tilt sky remote from
the mild blue of Mandalay: the largest ruby
ever auctioned, outlasting love or sentiment.

CYNTHIA ZARIN

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turns the film over, so to speak, to an actor, as he did with Langdon on the bus. Tracy's declaration of intent near the end of *State of Union* is such a moment, but possibly the finest of them in all of Capra is the scene in *Mr. Smith* when Claude Rains bursts into the Senate chamber, strides to the front, and confesses. Capra knew he had a marvelous actor in Rains, versed in the large spaces of the theater, and just let him rip in long shot.

On the whole, however, it's a strange experience to see a group of Capra pictures en bloc. The overall impression is of molasses cleverly poured, through which an occasional moment emerges unsoppy and brilliant. (Except for *Lost Horizon*, which is just molasses.) *Mr. Deeds* is by far the best of the ones I've seen recently, because there is some possibility, however slim, to make a connection between its share-the-wealth romance and life beyond the borders of the screen. Its reception in 1936 was much less cautious than this. Graham Greene, then a London film critic, said, "*Mr. Deeds* is Capra's finest film ... and that means it is quite unmatched on the screen." In some ways Greene preferred Capra to Lubitsch and Clair and even (as a director, of course) to Chaplin. The left-wing *New Theatre* in America said that *Mr. Deeds* astounded "with its indubitable sincerity of purpose," its recognition "that the world is a place where the great multitudes of men suffer for the excesses of the few."

Today, however, even *Mr. Deeds*, and certainly all the other Capra films mentioned herein, can be enjoyed—can be endured—only as contrivances, as more or less ingenious artifacts with about as much relation to reality as ingenious music boxes. This was not how they were intended or how they were initially taken. Mr. Smith's filibuster and the instant widespread support from the boys of his home state, and the townsfolk rallying behind Walter Huston's bank in *American Madness*, were meant to illuminate facets of the national character, to apostrophize the Common Man. Today they seem more cute than convincing.

The strangest point is that Capra was once considered a political filmmaker. What is the political program of Mr. Smith in the Senate? Send kids to the country so that they can learn to love America. What are the dangerous radical politics of John Doe? Reach out and shake your neighbor's hand. Honesty vs. crookedness eventually becomes the issue, but that essentially non-political struggle has nothing to do with the alleged ideas in the screenplays. Capra's films became known as political works, I'd hazard, less because of their ideas, which

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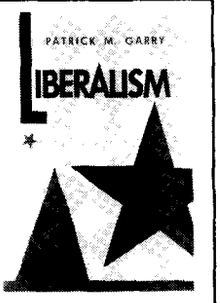
Patrick M. Garry



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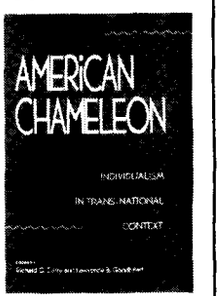

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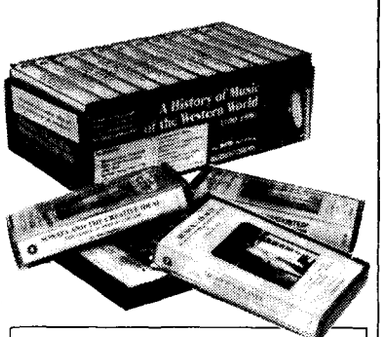

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are virtually nonexistent, than because of their settings and their ambience.

James Stewart, in his twenty-three-hour filibuster (brought off, apparently, without having to answer a call of nature), becomes an icon of political vigor because it is Movie Star Stewart growing hoarse out there on, of all places, the Senate floor, with Movie Star Arthur cheering him on from the press gallery, and with twinkly old cowboy star Harry Carey as the vice president presiding over the Senate. Image replaces idea, and in an almost vicious way makes idea superfluous. It happens again when Grandpa Vanderhof (Lionel Barrymore) persuades a would-be armaments tycoon (Edward Arnold) to give it all up and play the harmonica. Riskin and Buchman may have had more cogent political ideas when they began work with Capra, but those ideas had to make their way to the screen through Rewrite Valley. Capra often claimed more authorship of screenplays than he was credited with. He needn't have worried; his influence is clear.

So desperate, apparently, was the need in the Hollywood pantheon for a filmmaker who dealt with American politics and society that reservations about Capra's work, which existed in some quarters early on, were lacquered over with the glib encomia of the film world and, later, of the academic cineastes. But to call Capra a great director is to maul even further that bruised adjective. John Ford can seriously be called great because, though the gorge rises at his assorted sentimentalities, the whole texture of his work, its artistic reach—in *The Searchers* or *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* or *My Darling Clementine*—transcends the material. With Capra, the proportions are usually the reverse: crystal islands in a glutinous sea.

All through his book, McBride enables us to see these and other verities about Capra. But he doesn't expose, he assesses. And he correlates. If he shows us how little the political flavor of Capra's films had to do with the man's own beliefs, he also shows us how the dour, sometimes grim facts of Capra's private life were transmuted into film, sometimes into comedy. One instance:

> The most pervasive element in Capra's work for Sennett—both for Langdon and for the other comedians—was the treachery and duplicity of women. Capra's sexual and marital problems were brought into his work with an increasing ferocity that often makes the scripts seem more tragic than comic. The essential horror of *The Marriage Circus* ... was a pure undisguised scream from Capra's heart, an outcry at all the women who had ever mistreated him, beginning, of course, with his mother and ending with [his first wife].

As a whole, McBride's book—rigorous about such Capra fantasies as his Lost Horizon of science, about the contradictions and twists in his mind and temperament—takes on an importance that is unique for this kind of biography. It becomes essential to a true knowledge of the films by giving us truth about the man. I don't argue that such a knowledge is always necessary, or that a disparity between life and work arbitrarily diminishes the work. Do we really care how closely Fellini stuck to facts in *I Vitelloni* and *8½* and *Amarcord*? Those films are such high accomplishments that if there is any transmutation of data in them, it only adds luster to their art. With Capra, the case is just the opposite. The falsities in his films, fixed there by a clear talent, are puzzling. McBride's book helps us to understand why, despite Capra's dazzle and delights, his films are finally not satisfactory. •

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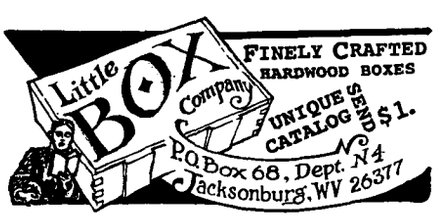

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TRB *continued from page 6*

just the direct payoff, not counting the deterrent effect a greater chance of getting caught would have on other would-be tax cheats. Responsible estimates of that are from one to seven times the size of the direct payoff.

A commonsense business person would say you should keep spending more money on catching tax cheats until the extra dollar you spend brings in less than a dollar of lost revenue. Reasonable concerns about excessive government meddling and burdening of innocent taxpayers would dictate stopping well short of that businesslike standard, but not as far short of it as we are now.

Having demagogued Michael Dukakis on this issue, President Bush, once in office, began including billions of dollars labeled "improved tax collections" in his annual budgets. The lure of the free revenue was irresistible. But Bush has done little to make the revenue materialize. The current IRS budget contains $29 million to start up an enforcement program aimed at high-income individuals and corporations, which is expected to bring in $750 million over five years. Peanuts.

And even this had to be rammed down the administration's throat by Democrats in Congress. Last year Bush's Office of Management and Budget wanted the IRS to shift resources from auditing the affluent to targeting the middle class. OMB was looking for a quick cash hit, since middle-class people tend to give in and pay up faster. The IRS resisted, but found its funds for auditing high-income people slashed anyway.

With their constant denigration of the government, their sneering implication that all taxes are wasted, their ridicule of reasonable efforts to enforce the tax laws, President Bush and his predecessor have helped to create an atmosphere in which an honest taxpayer feels like a sucker. Their rhetoric alone has probably cost the Treasury billions in lost revenue. Changing that atmosphere will require more than just new computers at the IRS.

MICHAEL KINSLEY

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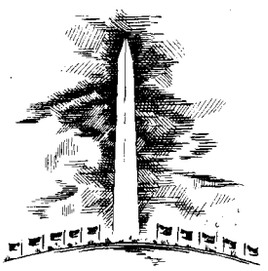
WASHINGTON DIARIST

Waiting for Perot

THE LATEST PARLOR GAME IN Washington, according to William Safire's language column a few weeks ago, is called the Shakespeare Campaign of 1992. The rules are simple: one player says Iago, another supplies a real-life analogue—Richard Darman. Or you can start with a contemporary character: Hillary Clinton or Marilyn Quayle? Take your pick, Lady Macbeth or Portia. Cuomo? Hamlet. This is what passes for highbrow entertainment at dinner parties in the capital. I guess you just have to get into the swing of it. SC '92 has allegedly become an office fad at the *Times*, and Safire reported on several rounds he enjoyed with his colleagues: Samuel Skinner and Robert Teeter—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Ross Perot—Brutus; Jerry Brown—Laertes. (Safire also said he had several political commentators in mind for the role of Polonius, but declined to embarrass them by name.) For some reason the game has yet to catch on here at TNR. But if it does, we'll correct for the Inside-the-Beltway bias: comparing the current political scene to tragedy is a little much.

I'VE BEEN BONING UP ON THE comedies instead, and I almost think I could get into the spirit—especially since I quickly hit the jackpot in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Farcical theatricality suits this campaign. Remember the play within the play? Six tradesmen (Quince the carpenter, Snug the joiner, Bottom the weaver, Flute the bellows-mender, Snout the tinker, and Starveling the tailor) gather to rehearse and then perform a bumbling version of "Pyramus and Thisbe" to celebrate the wedding of the Duke of Athens and the Queen of the Amazons. The updated dramatis personae: the irrepressible Bottom (selected by Quince to star as Pyramus, a "sweet-faced man") is Bill Clinton. When he finds himself cursed with a donkey's head, Bottom delivers a classic I'm-still-in-the-race speech: "I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will walk up and down here, and will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid." Starveling, picked for the role of Moonshine, is—well, it's obvious: "Myself the man i' the moon do seem to be." Quince gives Snout the challenging part of the Wall: that's Bob Kerrey, who wanted to seem rock solid but was in the end just boring. The other two characters embody the rhetorical extremes of this year's campaign. Flute, who is told that as Thisbe he "may speak as small as you will," sounds like Paul Tsongas, with his flat, lisping delivery. By contrast, Tom Harkin, who thought that ranting was the same as eloquence, makes the ideal Lion, played by Snug. ("You may do it extempore," Quince reassures him, "for it is nothing but roaring.") As for Quince, the stage manager who assigns the roles and corrects the mispronunciations and malapropisms of the hapless cast—here's a role for Safire himself.



BUT THE ENTERTAINMENT I'm trying to popularize is called the Beckett Campaign of 1992, or *Waiting for Perot.* It's a more populist game. You don't have to be a political junkie or a Shakespearean aficionado. The goal isn't neat pairings, but a rambling dialogue. The rules are simple: do what everybody in Washington is doing, puzzling with friends over the Perot phenomenon, and start ad libbing with Beckett's play in mind. All you need is a couple of glasses of wine, and a quick reminder of Vladimir and Estragon's conversation as they await Godot:

VLAD: Let's wait and see what he says.
ESTR: Who?
VLAD: Perot.
ESTR: Good idea.
VLAD: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.
ESTR: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.
VLAD: I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.
ESTR: What exactly did we ask him for?
VLAD: Were you not there?
ESTR: I can't have been listening.
VLAD: Oh ... Nothing very definite.
ESTR: A kind of prayer.
VLAD: Precisely.
ESTR: A vague supplication.
VLAD: Exactly.
ESTR: And what did he reply?
VLAD: That he'd see.
ESTR: That he couldn't promise anything.
VLAD: That he'd have to think it over.
ESTR: In the quiet of his home.
VLAD: Consult his family.
ESTR: His friends.
VLAD: His agents.
ESTR: His correspondents.
VLAD: His books.
ESTR: His bank account.
VLAD: Before taking a decision.
ESTR: It's the normal thing.
VLAD: Is it not?
ESTR: I think it is.
VLAD: I think so too.
Silence

The possible variations are endless. BC '92 may seem a little avant-garde, but let Perot ride high in the polls a little longer, and a lot of Washington talk is going to sound exactly like this.

IN AMERICA'S BOOMING LECTURE business, you may do it more or less extempore and make a mint; you certainly don't have to be riveting to rake in the money. "Mr. Gorbachev had received hundreds of invitations to deliver X speech in Y place for $100,000," the ex-president's American handler explained last week when they were hobnobbing in New York, "but I told him that would not be dignified." However disingenuous, the swipe at high-priced speechifying was well deserved: for a certain privileged sector of the population, going on the circuit has become the upper-crust equivalent of going on the dole. The erstwhile public servant pleads family hardship (impoverished by his years of civic duty), avoids looking for honest work at an honest wage, signs up with a lecture bureau, and lines up periodically at the lectern to collect a check. It sets a bad example, and pretty soon everybody's after the easy money. The time has come to tighten up eligibility standards and specify work requirements. I realized just what an uphill battle it's bound to be when I received a lecture invitation exemplifying the new strictness I have in mind. The letter, proposing a talk in a series on biography, bordered on insulting: evidently I had stumbled onto the rare lecture coordinator determined to put chiselers on the straight and narrow. "Any attempt to give just a forty-minute 'Reader's Digest' capsule history of the subject's life, or an academic, jargon-filled lecture, would be perceived by the audience as a failure," I was warned (before I had even accepted!). "Similarly, talks delivered off the cuff, without reference to a prepared text, are not attractive." I'm easy to intimidate, but can you imagine anyone trying it on Gorbachev?

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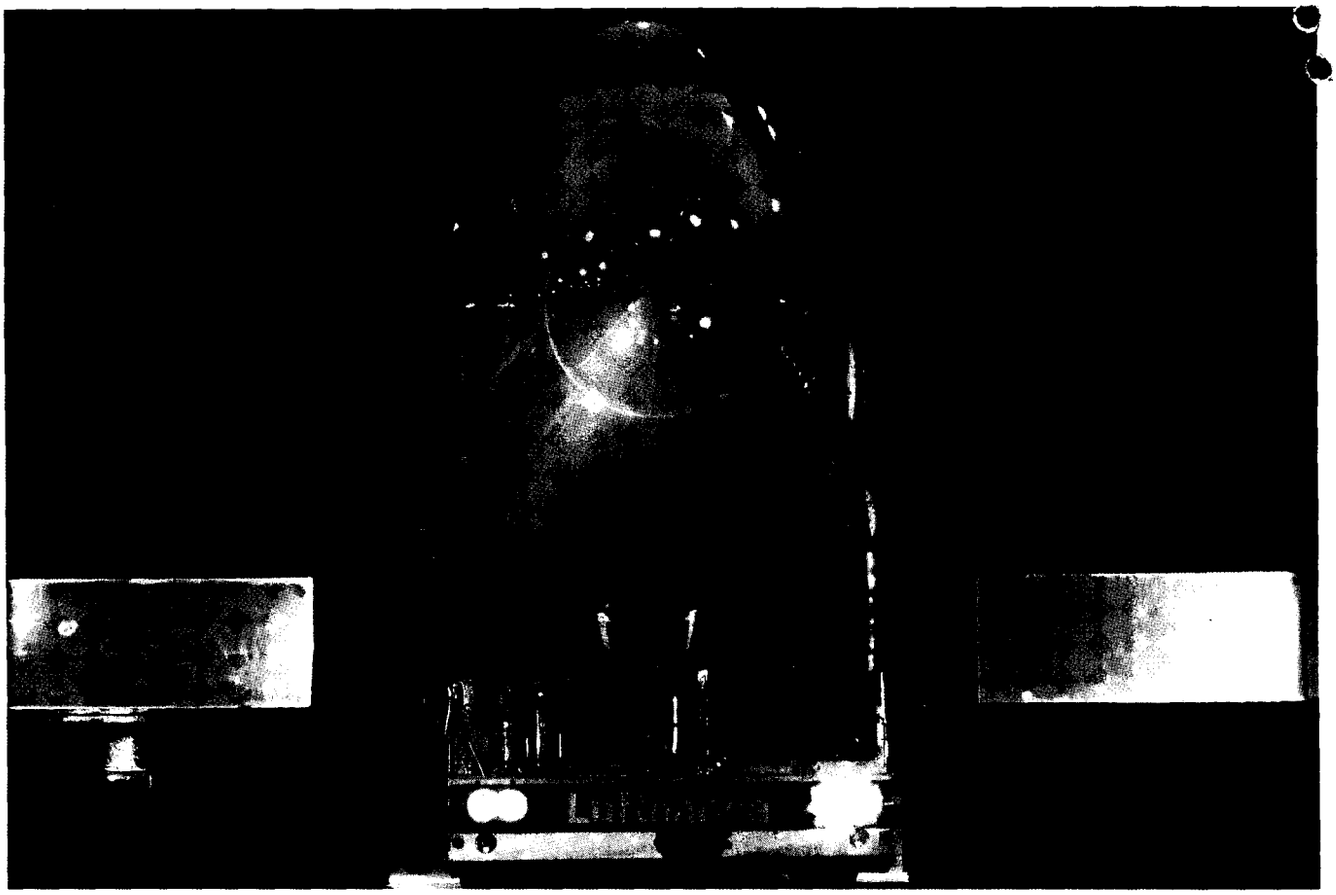

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